

Title: Wind That Shakes the Seas and Stars

Summary: AU of OoTP, Slytherin!Harry, HPDM slash. Snape begins the year with a mistake that sets his ward against him. Now Harry is using all his own considerable cunning to ride out the multiple storms, even as the Second War goes into motion.

Notes: This is the fifth story in what I call the Sacrifices Arc, following Freedom and Not Peace. It's therefore not going to make much sense if you haven't read the first four. By this time, the differences from canon are pronounced, and while there are nods to OoTP here and there in this story, its plot is not much like OoTP's.

This story, as planned, is a long bastard, at 95 numbered chapters, plus some Interludes and Intermissions. (If you want to see the outline, you can visit my LiveJournal; the link is in my profile).

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Updates: I archive on Fanfiction, Skyehawke, and my LJ, and send notice of updates through my Yahoo!Group. The addresses of all of them, and information about the Arc itself, can be found in my Fanfiction profile. Complete Word and .PDF files for download are on a site created by Therio, the link to which is also in my profile.

Warnings: Violence, language, torture (both physical and mental), child abuse (in memories), heavy angst, twisted psychology, slash and het and saffic (femmeslash) in varying degrees of explicitness, multiple character deaths (both canon and OC's, both good and bad guys, both minor and major characters).

Well, then.

Let's start this off with a bang, shall we?

Wind That Shakes The Seas and Stars
Chapter One: Breeding Basilisks

Harry dreamed.

He was once again in the cavernous house he had seen in his visions earlier that year. He could feel his whiskers twitching, and knew he was once more in the lynx form he'd adopted in the other visions.

So cling to any familiarity you can find, he thought, as he lifted his head and felt his scar burst into pain. Fight your way through the agony, fight your way through the knowledge that Voldemort is back. You have to survive, so you might as well fight.

He took a step forward, and nearly tipped over. He had forgotten that his left forepaw was missing, victim of Bellatrix's cut just as his left hand had been. Harry forced himself to work through the feelings that wanted him to lash his tail and squall. He could not afford to be enraged right now—or ever, in truth. He thought of unicorns, and light, and crept forward until he could see around the divan that stood in front of him.

The first thing he saw was the fire burning in the center of the floor, pulsing like a heartbeat and sending flares and ripples of light and shadow through the room. It was more red than orange, and more gold than either, and it spread out in a strange pool beneath a squat yellow shape that it took Harry some moments to identify. When he did, he felt his mouth pull up in a snarl.

An egg.

He heard Voldemort's laughter, and backed hastily behind the divan again just as the Dark Lord strode into sight, his robes fluttering around him and his lipless mouth stretched in a smile. He was not sure if Voldemort could see him in visions like this, but he simply couldn't take the chance. Once again, he calmed his breathing, and called up the training that Lily had given him when she told him he might become a spy in the wars. See everything. Remember everything. You never know what might be useful.

Harry had to know if that egg was really what he suspected it was, and so he stayed still as Voldemort turned to speak to something or someone he couldn't see. "Come here. Come here and fulfill your

duty.” The Dark Lord broke into laughter again halfway through the words, as if he found them funny. Harry didn’t see why until the person he was talking about moved into sight.

It wasn’t actually a person, or even people, but a group of snakes, gleaming black and green and red. They wrapped themselves around the egg and began to massage it. Harry saw the fire gleam in their scales dully for a few moments.

Then they burned.

Harry shuddered as he heard hissing cries of pain, odd words that were probably as close as snakes could come to obscenities, and the sharp crackle of scales and flesh crisping in the flames. Nevertheless, even as some of the serpents fell dying to the floor, others took their place, and the ones who were lucky enough to be high up on the egg, away from the fire, went on massaging, hissing, writhing, as if they could rub their own bodies into the shell.

Voldemort went on watching, his mouth twisted in a half-smile. When he spoke again, it was in a language Harry didn’t know, but the words seemed to sear themselves into his brain. They were ugly sounds, with a hook on the end of them. Harry thought of speaking them himself, and felt the fur stand up on his spine.

Four words—and Harry hated being able to tell that, hated the fact that he thought he could recall this language if he had to—and the snakes abruptly lay still. The fire flared and leaped, wrapping the egg in molten gold and obscuring the sight of the serpents. Voldemort laughed again, a fevered sound of high-pitched excitement, and Harry’s scar deepened into agony that made his vision blacken.

He could feel the magic dancing madly through the room. It coiled back on itself like a serpent, and then sank cold, poisoned fangs of power into the egg. That killed Harry’s hope, if he’d had any, that the Dark Lord was anything less than fully recovered from the memory loss and mental damage that Harry had managed to inflict on him.

The flame and the magic combined with each other, whirled around in an embrace, and dissipated. What remained was the egg, a gleaming

red-gold shape that Harry could not find beautiful, despite its resemblance in color to Fawkes. It looked more like swirls of blood floating in urine.

Voldemort spoke one more hook-like word, and yanked his hand backward. The eggshell splintered at once, as if pulled from outside rather than smashed from within, and a lithe, wriggling black shape poured through the rent and into the world.

Harry half-closed his eyes as he watched the young basilisk dance, its deep green scales still wet from the egg fluid. He wasn't sure how deadly the snakes could be when newborn, or even if its gaze would work on him in a vision, but he wasn't about to take the chance. There would be less taking of chances, less sacrifices, from now on, he promised himself. He had to live to fight this war.

Voldemort walked around the basilisk and spoke to it in what Harry knew must be Parseltongue; the snake stilled at once upon hearing his voice. "So beautiful, my young one. You will listen to me. You will keep your false eyelids upon your eyes when you are near anyone belonging to me, whom you may know by this Mark." He spun one hand, and the Dark Mark, flaring green, took form in the air above him. "You will not bite anyone bearing this Mark, either. All others are your rightful prey when you are grown and unleashed upon my enemies."

The basilisk raised its head—or her head, Harry saw, since she was missing the scarlet plumes that would have identified her as a king basilisk. "I am hungry. Obedient, but hungry. Bring me one whom I may eat, my master."

Voldemort let out a lazy laugh, and looked over his shoulder. Two masked Death Eaters came from the shadows, and they held a struggling creature between them that turned Harry's heart to a stone.

It should have been impossible for them to capture a unicorn foal. How in the world did they do it?

The foal was purely golden, marking it as less than two years old. Its eyes were large and a shifting deep color, somewhere between purple and deep blue. It thrashed and kept on thrashing, the

movements of a purely wild and free being made to endure no captivity.

Harry moved a step forward. It didn't matter if he would be seen, if he was in danger from the vision itself or the basilisk or Voldemort. He had hidden once while he watched the Dark Lord slaughter a unicorn. He would not hide so again.

He sprang from behind the divan, his claws on his right front paw unsheathed, letting the pressure from his hind legs drive him—

And passed through the basilisk as if through a ghost. Harry landed on the floor beyond, and it felt solid. Perhaps he had missed his strike. He turned, planting his hind feet and spinning to hook his front paw into one of the advancing Death Eaters' robes.

They passed across his fur like smoke.

Frantic now, Harry tried to reach out to the unicorns, the free ones who must be singing in horror at what was happening to one of their own. Do you see this happening? Why aren't you here? Free him! Come on! Where the fuck are you?

No response came, and the basilisk was edging forward, her long fangs bared and her head slowly turning so that Harry, standing in front of the unicorn, would be within her deadly yellow gaze in a moment.

Harry reached out with all his willpower, pouring magic and strength through himself, trying to open a conduit through his body to the vision and provide a shining wall of defense and protection for the foal. He was good at defensive magic. He'd certainly trained long enough for it. He had to be able to save the foal now. He'd seen one child lost to Voldemort's people already, and that was enough.

Nothing happened. The Death Eaters dropped the unicorn hastily to the ground, and the basilisk struck, coiling her body around the foal and sinking her fangs home. The foal trembled and let out a thin scream. His legs thrashed once, and then he was still, blue-silver

blood leaking from the holes in his neck as the basilisk turned him around and began to swallow him headfirst.

Voldemort was laughing.

Harry crouched where he was, able to see everything but unable to be seen or interact with it, disbelieving, shaky, horrified.

What changed? Why should I have been able to hurt and kill Nagini before, but I can't stop Voldemort's other snakes now?

The only possible answer Harry could come up with was that Voldemort's resurrection had somehow altered the link between them. It would protect him, but at the same time, it would damn anyone in the position of innocent sacrifice.

Harry hated—well. He was not sure what he hated most at the moment, Voldemort or the situation or himself. He crouched where he was, and hissed hisses that no one paid attention to, and hated. He watched the basilisk eat the unicorn, drinking the blood that would taint her, if she were not already so, and bind her even more firmly to Voldemort.

He imagined the unicorns who had carried him into the sea yesterday morning, searching in vain for the golden foal the Death Eaters had taken, and wished he could vomit.

Voldemort caressed the basilisk's head and murmured to her, in words that Harry could have understood but did not care to. He flattened his ears and his whiskers and stared at the floor. Is this going to happen in every vision from now on?

Then he shook his head. He should not be concentrating on this now. He had had to deal with grief and hatred and self-loathing enough in the past few days that he should be used to them. The important thing was what he could get out of the visions, since he could not stop having them, and he might as well use his invulnerability to his advantage. He glanced at the Death Eaters, but they retained their masks, and they gave no betraying gestures that might mark them as those whom Harry knew well.

Voldemort turned to them and spoke in high, cold English. "Call upon our contacts in the Ministry. And call upon Fenrir Greyback. He smelled his way to Tullianum prison once before. He can do so again."

One of the Death Eaters bowed low before he spoke. Harry twitched a tufted ear, but could hear nothing familiar in his voice, still. "My lord, are we to free all of the Death Eater prisoners we can find? If we are pressed for time, who should be our priority?"

"All of them, of course," said Voldemort peevishly. Harry glanced up at his white face, and found it twisted into a why do I surround myself with these idiots? expression.

Because only idiots will agree to have a skull and snake branded into their flesh and conduct senseless raids on the Muggle and wizarding worlds? Harry thought. Well, idiots and people who are acting as sacrifices for their friends and people who've repented and decided that, yes, they were in fact idiots. He found it comforting to think about Peter and his allies at a time like this, and Snape—

No, not Snape. He wasn't allowed to think of him, or he would weaken. Carefully, Harry willed thoughts like that out of his head, and tried to listen for something he thought might make the unicorn's death worth it.

"But if you must choose," Voldemort continued, "free Walden Macnair first."

The Death Eaters bowed to him and Apparated away. Harry felt his dream dissolving, and doubted he would see anything more interesting anyway, as Voldemort was simply stroking the queen basilisk and murmuring soothing words to his pet.

I have seen quite enough, he thought, as he turned and vanished among the dissolving shreds of dream, back into reality.

Harry opened his eyes slowly. His body felt, oddly, as though he really had been taking springs and leaps with it, but he supposed the intense physical nature of the dream, or his own exhaustion, might

have something to do with that. He blinked away the blood he had expected to be pouring from his scar, and found Draco leaning over him, eyes so intense they hurt.

“Are you all right?” Draco asked, very softly.

Harry nodded once, and then winced as that set his scar off like a brand again. He sat up carefully. “Do you have a parchment and quill?” he asked, flexing his right hand. Then he flexed the glamour of the left, trying to mimic the natural bends and motions of his actual appendage. It was harder than he thought it would be, especially since he had to do it in a mirrored way and not simply replicate the movements.

Draco lifted a quill and a scroll silently from beside his chair. Harry, holding his head so that blood didn’t drip on the parchment and pinning the side of the paper with his left wrist, wrote as simple and short a note to Scrimgeour as he could, warning him to guard Walden Macnair with extra precautions and watch for Death Eaters trying to find their way into the new, hidden Ministry prison.

By the time he looked up from the paper, Fawkes was already sitting on the back of Draco’s chair, crooning softly. Harry blinked at him. “But wouldn’t you burn the paper to ashes?” he asked.

The phoenix gave a sharp chirp, and in Harry’s heard formed the vision of an owl swooping awkwardly and crashing into a wall. That made Harry smile, briefly. Fawkes was saying that accidents could happen with owl post, too, but that most wizards still trusted their messages to the birds.

Fawkes picked up the parchment in his beak and vanished into a ball of flames. Harry leaned back and closed his eyes. Wherever Scrimgeour is, that note will probably reach him in time. I don’t think that the new wards the Ministry put on Tullianum will let Greyback sniff his way right in as he could last time.

“Harry?”

Harry opened his eyes. "Yes, Draco? I'm definitely not asleep. I'm not sure I'll sleep the rest of the night."

"The Dark Lord's recovered from whatever it was that you did to him?" Draco sat plucking at the sheet, staring at the floor.

"Yes," said Harry simply.

Draco's hands clenched around the sheet, hard enough to make it shift on Harry's legs. "I wish he hadn't," he said. "I wish he'd died."

Harry opened his mouth, then shut it. It wasn't really the wish that surprised him, and he could hardly scold Draco for wishing Voldemort dead if he were going to wish anyone like that. It was the intensity in Draco's voice, the same kind that had been there when he essentially swore vengeance on Bellatrix Lestrange for cutting off Harry's hand.

Harry reached out and gently touched Draco's wrist. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Draco snorted, a desperate sound of laughter and hatred both at once, and then lifted his head. "Shouldn't I be asking you that?" he demanded, leaning forward until his nose was inches from Harry's face.

Harry shrugged and rubbed absently at the blood on his cheeks, using the glamour of his left hand before he thought about it. Not dry yet, he noticed, as the liquid smeared on his sleeve. No point in cleaning his face yet, then. The scar would go on bleeding for a while.

"I think we can both ask each other that," he said. "I know that it hurts you to see me suffering like this."

"But you're the one who looks like you've been through the wars." Draco took a deep breath. "And it's only going to get worse, isn't it?"

"Yes." Harry didn't see the need to add anything else. He knew what Draco was struggling with, in silence. Being in love with him would take a toll. Being at his side even as a friend would take a toll. Harry

didn't think he had the right to make Draco's decision for him. If he chose to withdraw—

Harry's feelings twisted in panic, and he sat on them.

--then he chose to withdraw. He had to do what his will and his heart inclined him to do, what would keep him safe if safety was more important than anything else.

Draco looked up just then, into his eyes, and let out a harsh, exasperated breath. Then he grabbed Harry around the middle, hard enough to make Harry jump a bit in surprise and set up a throb of pain through his sore muscles. "Stop that," he murmured fiercely into Harry's ear. "I'm not going to abandon you. I'm never going to. I love you, I told you that, and you are part of my life, and if you try to force me away from you—body-binds and sleeping spells, remember?"

"You said that was only if I went into danger without you," Harry muttered, but he allowed himself to relax and return the embrace as best he could. Draco was pinning his arms, and he couldn't move them very far.

"Trying to fight this war by yourself would count." Draco leaned as close to Harry as he could. "I love you, and Merlin you're stubborn, and you are going to come to Malfoy Manor with me for the summer."

Harry narrowed his eyes. He's too Slytherin for his own good, sometimes. I might have agreed to that if I weren't listening so closely. He gently pushed at Draco, forcing him to loosen his hold a bit. "We've already talked about that. I told you why I couldn't. I would ask that—"

"Where would you go, then?" Draco demanded, his eyes narrowing. "You can't stay with Snape, and if you suggest actually going to your parents, I'll—"

"Use a Body-Bind or a sleeping spell, I know." Harry frowned at him. "I have another solution." He paused, reaching out instinctively for Fawkes to warn him if Dumbledore was listening, and then remembered that Fawkes was gone, delivering the message to

Scrimgeour. Harry shook his head and lowered his voice, leaning close to Draco. "I was thinking McGonagall. She already knows more than I wanted her to, but she wouldn't be dangerous to me the way that your father would, and she's capable of protecting me."

"If you stay in the same school as Snape and Dumbledore, what will happen?" Draco held his eyes, and did not look away.

"Snape I can ignore," said Harry. He was certain of it now. The wild anger that had driven him on Midsummer night, and which he thought now his compulsion from Dumbledore might have influenced, had fled him. "And it's necessary that I stay near the Headmaster. If anything can bring him to redemption and to consider his mistakes, then I think that being near me might do it."

"What are you talking about, Harry?"

Harry jerked; he couldn't help it, though he thought part of the movement came from Draco's startlement as well as his own. He lifted his head, slowly, and looked over Draco's shoulder towards the doors of the hospital wing.

His mother was standing there, her eyes wide, her head slowly shaking back and forth. Harry couldn't decide if she looked mad or not, but he knew that he didn't like the expression on her face when she gazed at him.

"You're coming back to Godric's Hollow for the summer, Harry," she said softly. "That's what we agreed on. That's what Albus told me you'd agreed on when he summoned me. Why are you making plans now to do something other than what we asked of you?" She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Will you ever stop thinking that you know best, or that you can just change your word when you give it without any consequences?"

Harry started to respond, but a shadow stirred behind his mother, and Dumbledore entered. He took a moment fussing with his robes, as if he were going to appear in public at any moment and needed to look

good, though as far as Harry could see, they were his normal star-decorated attire.

Then he lifted his head. Harry looked straight into blue eyes.

Dumbledore knew, now, that Harry had been fooling him, only pretending to be under the compulsion.

Draco made a wordless noise, a small snarl, and drew his wand from his pocket, but Dumbledore got there first. He lifted a hand, and Draco's wand soared across the hospital wing to land in his palm. He lowered it gently to rest on a hospital bed next to him. He hadn't really looked at Draco all this while, Harry saw. The greatest part of his attention was on Harry himself.

And there was a storm gathering in his eyes.

"I thought we had agreed, Harry," he said, his voice full of ancient disappointments. "I thought we could trust you, that you were not going to become a Dark Lord like the one you had struggled so hard to avoid becoming. But it seems that I was wrong."

He struck in the next moment.

Harry had already called a Protego, one of the Charms he could do without thought, wandless, in his sleep if he needed to. The shield sprang up around him and Draco, and the mingled light of Dumbledore's spells—two cast at once, hexes to render him sleepless and motionless—bounced off the shield. Dumbledore only lightly sighed, as if he had anticipated this result and did not like it, but could put up with it for the necessary length of time. He moved a few steps forward, putting out a hand to Lily when she would have followed him.

"Rest, my dear," he said gently. "I know this would be hard for you to endure. You have struggled and sacrificed to keep your son from becoming what he has, and he has anyway. That is a hard blow for any mother to endure. Rest."

Lily stood where she was and bowed her head tamely. Harry felt his lip curling, wondering why someone who had been in Gryffindor would be so spiritless, and then he shook his head sharply. No, he wouldn't think that way. He couldn't think that way if he intended to heal her. She was only contemptible as she was right now. That didn't mean that she'd been contemptible when she was a child. It didn't mean that she'd never had any Gryffindor qualities.

Dumbledore moved forward until he stood at the end of the bed, just outside the limit of the Protego. His expression was the most benevolent and open that Harry could remember seeing it, perhaps because it was the weariest, as if he were letting Harry see all the toll the war had taken on him.

"Come, Harry," he said. "I know that you are dedicated to this war, committed to it, no matter that you do not agree with us on the best methods for fighting it. It would cost much and avail you little to destroy me, or hurt me, and it would earn you distrust from many of the Light wizards. And it would harm the wards of Hogwarts, and I think we all agree they must be made more secure than ever, now that Voldemort has returned. Surely, Harry, surely you can relax, and enter your mother's house, and have peace there as you learn about war."

Harry couldn't sense any edge of compulsion in the words, but that didn't mean it wasn't there. He bared his teeth, but said nothing. Dumbledore remained still, looking at him with patient, twinkling eyes, and waited.

Harry wondered for a moment why he didn't just attack. Then he remembered that Dumbledore probably feared his ability to eat magic, and, also, he wasn't supposed to be thinking about besting Dumbledore in battle. He was supposed to be his vates, to think about a way to snap his constricting thoughts—which Harry thought resembled a web, even though he knew they weren't a literal web—and invite him out into the light of wisdom and compassion.

Being a vates for everyone is hard.

“I don’t want to fight you,” he said carefully. “Nor do I want to destroy Hogwarts. But I found out that you used compulsion on me, sir, and for that reason, I don’t want to go home for the summer. I don’t want to follow any course of action that I agreed to when I wasn’t myself.”

“I was only looking out for your best interests, Harry,” said Dumbledore gently. “If you would only—”

The doors of the hospital wing, which had only half-opened when Dumbledore and Lily entered, abruptly flew back with a slam. Harry caught his breath as he realized that wandless magic had done that—the wandless magic of a powerful, angry wizard or witch who didn’t feel familiar. It definitely hadn’t been either him or Dumbledore, and it lacked the fanged edge of Snape’s power, and Harry was sure that he would have known at once if Voldemort was on school grounds.

He understood in a moment when a familiar woman entered the room, though not the source of her rage. Auror Mallory, the Head of the Auror Office since Scrimgeour’s election to Minister, was nearly as strong as Snape, and if her anger was riding her now, then so would her magic be. That power was strong and pure and cold to Harry, with a slight smell of tin, like snow being blown into his face.

Dumbledore turned and stared at Mallory with a faint frown on his face. “Auror,” he said. “What is it?”

Mallory snarled at him. Her wand was in her hand, but she didn’t point it at Dumbledore. Her magic was going to do just fine for her, Harry thought. He wondered if he should be more concerned about protecting her or Dumbledore. Even a Light Lord could be hurt by wandless magic of this power, if it got through his defenses.

“You knew,” she said. “You knew, and you were part of it, and it sickens me to think that I trusted you.”

Dumbledore frowned more deeply. “Auror, if you have had any strange dreams lately, I suggest that you consider what you are saying carefully. Voldemort could have reached out and—”

“Did you know,” said Mallory, while her magic whirled a small object out of the pocket of her robes, “that the only reason my father was never tried was that I killed him when he started eyeing my younger sister?” The small thing spun twice around her head, then snapped towards Dumbledore. The Headmaster watched it come, probably, thought Harry, believing that it wasn’t very dangerous.

Harry recognized it right before it hit. It was a Still-Beetle shell, which caused a stillness of the body so complete that even a powerful wizard wouldn’t be able to free himself, his magic caged under his skin. This one must also have had a Portkey attached to it, or have been made into a Portkey itself, because ordinarily a Still-Beetle would root a prisoner’s feet to the floor. Instead, Dumbledore froze and then disappeared into a whirl of colors a moment later.

“There,” said Mallory, and her gaze went to Harry. She gave him a short, choppy nod. “Sorry to have to do it like this, Potter, but we didn’t know where the bitch who calls herself your mother was. Your father came out of the house when we called for him. That was a neat, simple arrest. Not like this one.” She snarled again, and then whirled.

Harry, dazed, saw that two other Aurors had come in through the doors while he was entirely occupied watching Mallory and Dumbledore. One was Tonks, her hair a gleaming, metallic black. The other was Auror Feverfew, whom he’d met a few times before, especially when he patrolled the school this year. They’d just finished binding Lily’s hands behind her back. His mother’s eyes were wide, and fearful, and glimmering with tears.

Finally, finally, too late to do any good by Dumbledore, Harry snapped out of his trance. He dropped the Shield Charm and pushed slightly away from Draco, who’d come close to him and wrapped an arm around his waist. “What are you doing?” he demanded. “Why are you arresting my mother and the Headmaster?”

Mallory, who had been watching Lily with her magic dancing and jumping around her, glanced at him. Her face softened. “I haven’t gone through exactly the same things that you have,” she said, and Harry faltered before the way she seemed to see him. “But I know some of what it’s like. My father...touched me. Constantly. When I got

too old for him and he started doing it to my sister, my magic killed him. I was never tried, of course. When the Wizengamot saw the Pensieves, they all agreed that I had a right to defend my sister.”

Shit. Oh, shit. Oh, no. Harry coughed through the sticky mess in his throat, and managed to say, “What crime are my parents and the Headmaster charged with?”

“Child abuse,” said Mallory. “Almost any kind that you can describe. Emotional, mental, neglect, willingly putting you in physical danger...leaving you to You-Know-Who, for Merlin’s sake.” Her mouth twisted, and she looked at Lily. “I don’t consider you human,” she said casually. “I thought you should know that right now.”

Harry persisted through numb lips. “And who filed these charges?”

The answer was not unexpected, but the sound of it still bit into him.

“Severus Snape.”

Chapter Two: Snape's Firestorm

Snape could feel Harry coming.

Of course, even if he hadn't, the ice that raced along his office walls and the green snake that appeared coiled around his throat, hissing, would have been clues, he thought. But he could feel the actual rolling power of Harry's magic, too, a storm that promised pain and headache and heartache all in one. It grew to a dull pressure behind his temples long before the ice, long before the snake, long before the thundering knock that sounded on his door.

Of course, "long before" in this case means about five minutes, Snape thought. He sat back, one hand petting the snake looped on his neck. He hoped it would not coil too tightly. He still had bruises from the last time that Harry had decided to choke him.

"Enter," he said, when the knock came. His voice was calm, resolute, if heavy. His mind was much the same way. There were advantages to being an Occlumens and being able to slip all his emotions into one of the quicksilver pools that the discipline enabled him to maintain.

Merlin knows I will need it now.

The door opened, and Harry strode into the room. Snape watched him. He might, if he did not know Harry so well, be properly frightened. Harry's magic swirled around him in the form of an aura of darting black snakes, no sooner visible than they vanished again, crawling on the air and on his arms and clothing. His breath hissed and rasped between his teeth as though he had run a race, though it wasn't that far from the hospital wing to the dungeons. He fixed his eyes on Snape so fiercely that their green color seemed actually to have deepened a few shades.

But Snape knew Harry, and he had eyes. He saw how much of Harry's trembling and panting came from the effort of moving like this when he had done little but lie in a hospital bed and sleep for four days. He saw the pallor of his face, the dark circles beneath his eyes

that even that much rest had done little to remove, the way his apparent left hand didn't move quite in time with his right. He saw the fear behind the anger in Harry's eyes.

If only that fear were for someone other than his abusers!

"Hello, Harry," said Snape. "If you had wanted to see me, you know, you could have asked, and I would have come to you. I did not want to tax you by having you rise from your bed so early." He knew exactly how he would respond to this. He would not panic, he would not lean back or flinch, and, above all, he would not apologize. Even if Harry wanted him to, it was rather difficult to retreat across his bridges when he'd burned them all.

This is the only way to do things, the only way forward. Snape studied Harry's clamped lips, and decided the boy was trying not to say anything that would result in a scream. Harry claimed to want to change matters. Perhaps I can even make him see that this is a part of that.

Then he strangled the hope and pushed it back under the carcass of his heart. He had given up rights to Harry's love when he did this. He had to remind himself of that. It would never do to forget reality. He might long to have that love, that forgiveness, back, but it would have to be entirely Harry's choice to give them.

"How does it feel," Harry whispered at last, "to know that you have contributed to three murders?"

Snape froze, his heart beating louder than the snake hissed. "The Aurors did not—" he began.

"No, of course not." Harry gave a small laugh that was on the verge of being crazed with exhaustion. He is nearly at the end of his strength, Snape thought, as he watched Harry whirl away from him. "But you slaughtered the people that Lily and Dumbledore and James could have become. They might have been entirely different if I'd just managed to talk to them." Harry was breathing fast, his voice barely steady, as he extended a hand towards the wall and the ice cracked, tumbling in shards to his palm. "I was on the verge of changing my

relationship with James. You know that. You know he was getting better. Why did you charge him, too?"

"It had nothing to do with my rivalry with him," said Snape quietly. "I will say that under Veritaserum if you like, Harry."

Harry remained motionless for a moment, before his shoulders stiffened. Then he said, "No. I don't need that. Tell me why."

"Because he was a danger to you, and always must have been." Snape paused for a moment, wondering if he should try to spare the one who had helped him, and then pushing ahead as he remembered a resolve that had shone no less than his own. "Because your brother showed me the letter that James wrote him."

Harry slumped as if someone had punched him in the solar plexus. "No," he said a moment later, his voice hollow.

"But yes," said Snape, and closed his eyes as the snake around his neck took up a discordant song of Harry's pain. "The letter that said he believed you wished to reconcile with him and Lily, that you wished to be one family again, in Lux Aeterna or in Godric's Hollow. He is dangerous, Harry. He did not bother writing you to see if you were serious, or question your decision, even though your brother said you had told him on Midsummer morning that you still did not wish to see your mother. He is not a good father. His concern for that—wife of his overpowered his concern for you."

"But he could have changed," Harry whispered. "He has changed. He had changed. He was caught up in the excitement of the moment. And Lily and Dumbledore—"

"One compelled you, the other believed, or wished to believe, that the compulsion was the result of your own decision." Snape stood and leaned forward, eyes intently fastened on Harry's back, ignoring the snake. He had too much trust in his ward to think that it would simply bite him without warning. "And that is not counting every atrocity they have heaped on you since childhood. They slaughtered thousands of the people you could have become. I will not allow you to damn yourself in trying to save them."

Harry made a desperate noise in his throat that could have been the beginning of either a sob or a curse. He turned around, though, and Snape thought that a good sign. "Sir," he said, making an obvious effort to speak quietly and calmly. "Surely, if I could forgive them, then you should be able to?"

Snape narrowed his eyes. Even with his emotions mostly locked in Occlumency pools, Harry retained an ability that no one else had, to bring his anger and his protectiveness surging to the front of his mind both at once. "And what about Peter Pettigrew, Harry? And what about your brother? They have arranged his life, though they did not try to arrange his mind as thoroughly as they did yours. And what about the way Dumbledore required us to part for a time in third year, and the way he has torn the wards, and his negligence in watching and defending his school from Death Eaters? What does it say that his first action after the Dark Lord's return was to compel you, and not to take the field against him?"

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know. Peter deserves justice, but couldn't you have helped him file the charges and just left my own past out of it?"

"They would want to know why he obeyed Dumbledore's orders," said Snape. "And leaving you exposed to the Dark Lord would still have been seen as a crime, and then they would have looked further into the past, and they would have found the truth." He bit back the insults he wanted to give, the urge to shake Harry until he woke up from whatever desperate dreams still consumed him. That had only a little to do with the snake around his neck, which had grown quieter as Harry's anger retreated into pleading. "This was always going to erupt, Harry. I have received letters from Hawthorn Parkinson and Narcissa Malfoy and Adalrico Bulstrode, all attempting to pry, more or less subtly, information from me concerning your past. I waited to act until the moment when Lily and Dumbledore presented an intolerable danger to you. Then I could wait no longer."

Harry shivered and put his head down. "But if you dropped the charges—"

Snape's hold on his temper slipped at last. "I will not do that," he snarled, slapping his hand down in the middle of his desk. The snake around his throat hissed at him. Snape stifled the urge to unwrap it and throw it across the room. Harry was staring at him with wide eyes, seeming to hear what he said at last, and that was quite enough of a reaction. "I will never do that," said Snape, a little more calmly. "But I will admit that what the Ministry chooses to release, and what will escape on its own, is harder to predict. Therefore, I have made copies of the memories of your past—"

"What memories of my past?"

Snape tensed. He had forgotten that he hadn't told Harry this. "I invented a potion that took memories from Dumbledore's head about your training," he said coolly. "I have been watching them all, and transcribing them. The Ministry has received that potion along with one copy of the recorded memories." He took a deep breath, and flung himself down the tunnel that had opened up before him. "I have also sent Narcissa and Hawthorn Parkinson copies of the memories. I am not sure how far you actually trust the Bulstrodes. But I know that you trust Narcissa, and I know that Hawthorn forgave you for being involved in Dragonsbane's death."

Harry's face was an odd color, like green-tinted wax. His voice was a whisper, so deep with betrayal that Snape had to turn away from him. "Why would you do that?"

"Because," said Snape steadily, "I knew that you would turn away from me in the wake of this revelation—or even before, as you told me that you meant to do. You must have an adult near you who knows what happened to you and has the freedom to approach you."

"What makes you think that I would let them near me?" Harry was glaring at him now. Snape knew the pressure of a gaze like that, even though he wasn't looking at Harry. The snake around his throat took up the hissing again, too, sounding more serious than it had the last time.

"I know you," said Snape. "They are your allies, and you are sensible of the promises that you have made them. Besides, you would not

blame them for having knowledge that was given to them. You would blame me for betraying you, and that is what you are doing.” He gained, from what place he would never know, the courage to turn around and face Harry again. “I am going to make sure that you are protected, Harry, and in this matter I am aware that I am acting against your will.”

“But that’s,” said Harry, and stopped. Then he returned to the whisper, which Snape found harder to endure than the raging. Probably the exact reason that he’s using it. “Please. I came through it all right, didn’t I? They abused me, if you insist on using that word, and I still survived. And I’m taking steps to make sure that they don’t hurt anyone else. I was confining Dumbledore’s compulsion. I was getting ready to work on Lily. James would have been easy. Please, drop the charges.”

Snape shook his head. He wondered how he could phrase things so that Harry would know it was no good appealing in this direction. He had already been as blunt as he could, he thought.

No. Not quite as blunt as you could be.

“No, Harry,” he said. “Even if I dropped the charges now, the Minister would still investigate them. I swore once that I would unleash a firestorm to protect you, and reach for any help I could.” He folded his arms, but not because he was cold. “This dragon is flown, and everything is burning now. It is no good appealing to me to drop the charges. The moment is past when you could have changed things.”

Harry stood there shivering for a moment. Then he said, “My brother will have to endure this, too.”

“He agreed to,” said Snape quietly.

Silence. Then Harry whispered, “I don’t understand. Don’t you care about my parents and Headmaster Dumbledore at all?”

Snape curled his lip. “In comparison to you? Not at all,” he said.

Harry just stared at him for a long moment. Then he said, "But they're human, too."

"And so are you, Harry."

Harry ran his hand through his hair. "It's different with me, that's all."

"How different?" Snape decided that he might as well push on this point. The best he could hope for was Harry both safe and awakened to his potential danger, to what would have been the consequences if his parents and Dumbledore had remained free—and the consequences of their abuse in the past, as well. Harry was skating on the slippery ice of illogic right now. If Snape could shatter that ice...

"I just—it just is," said Harry, in a low, fretful voice.

"How?"

"It just is!" Harry jerked his head up and glared at him. The snake around his throat tightened like a noose. Snape stood still, barely breathing, hardly daring to do anything but watch the face of his charge.

Harry swallowed several times, the rage draining away as something else obviously occurred to him. "I'm going to talk to the Minister," he said abruptly, and then ran out of the room.

Snape watched him go, shaking his head as the green snake vanished. If you believe Scrimgeour to be more sympathetic to your parents than I am, Harry, you are grossly mistaken.

"Harry. You could rest, you know." Mallory's hand on his shoulder was firm, her voice soft and warm. "You don't have to see the Minister right now. I know that he wanted to talk to you sometime soon after your parents and the old fool were arrested, but it could have been any time in the next few days. You don't need to do this now."

"I want to," said Harry, and gave a little shake that would get her hands off him. Regulus, in his head, sighed and whispered at him, but Harry wasn't in the mood to listen. He was remembering, with all the clarity he could summon or force into his mind, all the times that Scrimgeour had acted fairly. He might achieve the right ends by sneaky methods sometimes, but they were the right ends. Harry trusted the Minister's sense of justice. Surely Scrimgeour would see that that justice, the cause of greatest peace and regard for other people's lives, required the release of his parents and Dumbledore. The trial would only cause a great deal of publicity and pity and excitement that would detract from their efforts to fight the war against Voldemort, and it would utterly ruin the chances anyone involved might have to be a new person. That had to matter.

Mallory crouched down in front of him, forcing him to look at her. Harry had insisted on accompanying the Aurors back to the Ministry, and had asked Draco if he would mind staying at Hogwarts. Mallory had acquiesced to all of it, though she had raised her eyebrows when Harry held Lily's hand and murmured that it was going to be all right. She had escorted him to the Head Auror's office without complaint. Harry could not imagine why she would balk now.

Mallory smoothed a hand down his hair. "Harry," she said, "I do understand what happened to you. You should rest. This has been a great shock—I remember that it was a shock to me when the Aurors found out what I had done to my father—and you're swaying on your feet."

Damn. Harry steadied himself by putting his hand on the wall. "Please, Auror Mallory," he said, concentrating to make sure his voice didn't shake. "I am sorry for what happened to you, and I understand that you only want to help me. But I have to see the Minister." The urgency inside him was making his muscles twitch and jump like a caged unicorn's. "Please?"

The Auror studied him, then nodded reluctantly. She rose and rapped on the Minister's door. Scrimgeour's voice answered at once, with no trace of tiredness. "Come!"

Harry let a cautious beam of hope enter his heart as he stepped into the office. Fawkes's message about the vision would have reached Scrimgeour by now. He had other things to think about. Surely, surely he would see that it was best—

And then he stepped in, and saw the way that the Minister's yellow eyes fixed on him, and knew it was not going to be that easy. Fawkes, sitting on an arm of the Minister's chair, lifted and flew towards him, singing. Harry held out his shoulder for the phoenix, but found himself unable to look away from Scrimgeour. There was admiration there, and respect, and profound compassion, and iron determination. Harry was afraid of what the determination meant.

"Fiona, please leave us," said Scrimgeour.

Auror Mallory hesitated. "Sir—"

"You may go to the prisoners' cells only if you think you're able to control yourself, Fiona," Scrimgeour said. "Not otherwise."

Harry felt the movement of air across the back of his neck as Auror Mallory bowed. Then she retreated, and there came the sound of the door shutting.

He's not going to help, Regulus whispered in his head. Save your strength, Harry. Get some rest, and heal. This is what should have happened long since, and you know it. He's not going to help.

Harry shook him away, almost literally, and sat down in the chair in front of the Minister's desk. "Sir," he said, deciding that he might as well be direct, "you've heard of the charges against my parents and Dumbledore by now. I would like to ask that they not come to trial."

"Impossible," said Scrimgeour, without changing expression.

Harry drew in a harsh breath. So Regulus had been right, but it was still like crashing full-force into a wall that he hadn't known was there.

He blamed his shock for letting Scrimgeour get a question in edgewise. “What happened, Potter? You’ve got blood all down your face.”

Harry swallowed. He’d honestly forgotten that, but now that Scrimgeour had drawn his attention to it, the dried blood felt flaky and itchy. “It’s my scar, sir,” he said quietly, and lifted his fringe, though he didn’t know if Scrimgeour would be able to make out the scar under the liquid. “It’s a connection, of sorts, to the Dark Lord. And I know that he’s returned to full power now.”

Scrimgeour dipped his head. “This trial will undoubtedly be hard on you,” he observed in a distant voice. “It will be hard on everyone.”

“Yes!” Harry gratefully seized the chance at explanation. “That’s the reason I would like you to stop it, sir. All it will do is bring up bad feelings and cloud the air with old crimes. Do we need that, on the eve of battle? I don’t think so. What my parents did is old news now, and I was rebuilding a relationship with my father until my guardian intervened.” He paused, remembering something else he had meant to do. “That reminds me. I wanted to ask for papers to terminate Severus Snape’s guardianship over me.”

He waited. Scrimgeour eyed him for a moment. Then he said, “It might take me some time to find the paperwork.”

Harry blinked. He knew the Minister’s tactics. He had just never dreamed that he might use them on him.

“Why?” he whispered, too stunned to add any title of respect.

Scrimgeour’s eyes narrowed. “I was an Auror, Mr. Potter,” he said, and his voice dipped into the Muggleborn diction he used in moments of great emotion. “I know ‘em when I see ‘em—criminals like your parents and the Headmaster, trials that have to be endured. Snape saw ‘em before I did. And he did the best thing a guardian should for his charge. You won’t do half so well with anyone else.” He paused. “Do you have someone else in mind?”

“No,” said Harry.

Scrimgeour nodded. "And unless Snape actually wants to emancipate you—which is about as likely to happen as my hair turning purple with green polka dots—then you need a guardian with your parents in prison."

"But if you released them—"

Scrimgeour lunged over the desk, the motion so unexpected that it silenced Harry. "They are child abusers," Scrimgeour snarled at him. His eyes made him look like an old lion watching its prey, though Harry knew the Minister wouldn't consider Harry his prey. No, that's reserved for people less able to defend themselves, Harry thought, and felt another surge of angry worry for his parents and Dumbledore. "I've dealt with abuse cases before, Potter. I have no sense of humor about 'em at all. None. Do you understand me? It's an Auror's job to arrest abusers and save the victims."

"I," said Harry, "am not a victim."

Scrimgeour's eyes narrowed further. Moving slowly, carefully, as though his bad leg had started to pain him, he sat down again. His voice was clipped when he spoke. "And I've seen that before, too, Potter. Children denying that what happened was abuse, saying that they deserved it."

"What does deserving have to do with anything?" Harry shook his head. There was a buzzing in his head, a howling like a storm in his ears. "I never said that I deserved it. I said I wasn't a victim. I'm not helpless. I could have defended myself if they ever physically hurt me. I was trying to help them, don't you understand?" His voice had turned into a plea, which horrified him, but he thought it might be one way to get Scrimgeour to comprehend him, since rational argument hadn't worked. "I've managed to persuade you that you should work with magical creatures instead of against them. I've managed to persuade some of my allies that their best chance lies with me and not Voldemort, even some of the ones who served Voldemort. I could have managed to persuade my parents and Dumbledore that their course was wrong, and then we could have handled everything privately."

"That doesn't change the fact that it was abuse, Potter," said Scrimgeour. "It doesn't change the fact that this is just another species of saying you deserved it, exonerating those who committed the crime and condemning yourself."

"I've forgiven them," said Harry. He was beginning to feel frantic, but he repressed it. There had to be some way of turning this aside. Snape had said the dragon was flown, but the dragon was still in the Ministry. There had to be some way of capturing and taming it. "I've not condemned myself for anything but weakness and indecision. Please. Let them go."

Scrimgeour shook his head slowly, but not as if he were refusing, more as if he were expressing silent wonder. "I see that Snape was more right than I ever dreamed," he said. "He said that you'll proceed in your convictions even with proof to the contrary staring you right in the face." His expression softened further. "Potter, I admire you enormously for surviving under these conditions. You have immense strength. But it's time for you to face your past, and that will take even greater strength. Can you do it?" He leaned forward, his eyes intent.

"What matters is whether they have the strength." Harry shifted hard enough to unseat Fawkes, who settled on the back of his chair instead and wrapped a warm wing around his neck. Harry sat on the impulse to break down. Control, control, I have to have control. "Don't you see, Minister? I'm concerned about them, and not about me."

"I see that," said Scrimgeour. "Better than you can imagine. Harry."

Harry swallowed, in order, the urges to lash out and scream out and cry. If he sees, why is he ignoring the truth? It'll be hard, but I can survive anything they throw at me. I can survive being seen, until people get bored and go back to paying attention to something else. But Connor and Lily and James and Dumbledore...why is no one more concerned about them? Connor may think he can survive this, but he doesn't know that like I know I can. And the others! Am I really the only one who cares about them?

He was becoming horribly, horribly afraid that he was the only one who did.

"I'd like to see my parents," he said. "Please." He knew it was no good asking to talk to Dumbledore. The Still-Beetle would make him unable to talk, and the Ministry was not about to remove that confinement yet.

Scrimgeour stared at him.

"I promise I won't hurt them," said Harry, in an agony of impatience. "I'll swear whatever oath you like."

"I am not worried about you hurting them," said Scrimgeour, in a voice full of meaning.

I'm worried about them hurting you. Harry could translate that well enough. It made him want to rage and shout and spit. Merlin, why did no one see that his parents were the victims here? They were the ones unable to defend themselves against accusations that would destroy their lives. Snape's firestorm would burn them alive. Dumbledore at least had his magic and the protection of his past reputation. But James's Auror exploits were old enough not to matter. And Lily...

His mother was without her magic.

And if they find out why she lost it, they'll only use it as more evidence of this being abuse that I couldn't survive. Goddamnit!

He shook his head, and made an effort to calm down and just think. "My father, at least, sir," he said. "The charges against him are different, aren't they? Just neglect, instead of active abuse?"

Scrimgeour paused as though reluctant to acknowledge it, and then said, "Yes, they are. But he was still a party to this."

Harry let out a low whistling breath. "He was on the verge of connecting with me again. He'll think a large part of this is just

Snape's grudge against him coming to the forefront. Please, sir. I want to talk to him. I want to explain. Let me?"

Scrimgeour stood. "I see that you will not rest until this request has been granted," he said. "And better the man who sired you than the woman who bore you. I will conduct you to this interview."

Harry nodded. He would have liked to go alone, but he knew, from the expression on Scrimgeour's face, better than to ask.

This is a mistake, Regulus insisted at him.

Harry didn't bother answering. Regulus and he had distinctly different ideas of what was right in this particular case. Regulus had actually whispered, when Harry had been talking with Snape, that Snape had done the right thing.

The cell they kept James in was a plain room, but not entirely bare. It had a bed in one corner, a writing table, a battered bookshelf, and a door that Harry thought led to the loo. Of course, it lacked any form of entertainment and Harry knew his active, studious father would be going crazy here, but compared to some of the cells they might have had at Azkaban, this was the height of luxury.

They entered to find James on his feet; he seemed to have sprung up the moment he heard the locking wards fall and the key turn, and was staring tensely at the door. His face was white.

"Hello, Dad," said Harry, his voice half-strangled with emotion, and started to step forward. Scrimgeour's hand came down on his shoulder, holding him in place, and Fawkes fluttered in front of him, momentarily obscuring the sight of James.

But Harry could hear his words well enough.

"How can you call me that, after what you did?" he snapped. "You said that you were going to come home, that you loved your mother enough to give her a second chance, and then this. How could you do this to people you claim to love?"

Scrimgeour's voice held every nuance of polite loathing as he replied, "I am surprised that you can ask that, sir. Do you know what love is? It looks rather different from your own behavior."

Fawkes dipped back to sit on Harry's shoulder, and showed James advancing a step. Scrimgeour's wand was up and pointing at once, and Fawkes gave a chirp that filled Harry's mind with visions of burning.

"I was under a compulsion from Dumbledore when I wrote that letter, Dad," said Harry, trying to remain as calm as he could. He deserved these castigations from James, Merlin knew he did, but they were pushing him further and further towards the edge of a breakdown that he couldn't afford to have. "I did mean to come home at the time, but only until I broke free of the compulsion. And then I didn't know how to tell you the truth without also revealing it to Dumbledore."

James shook his head, wildly. "Why were we arrested, though? That's what I don't understand."

Scrimgeour growled like a thunderstorm. "Because what you have done is wrong," he said. "Love is unfamiliar to you. What about the concept of justice?"

Harry flinched. Letting him escort me was a mistake. "I didn't choose that," he said, willing his father to believe him. "I would never have chosen to do that. That was entirely Snape's decision."

"And you didn't stop him?"

"I didn't know anything about it until just an hour ago!" Harry controlled himself at the expression on James's face. Calm, calm. This isn't his fault, remember? And he's upset. "I promise, Dad, I'm going to try and free you. Make them see that what you did wasn't that bad, that—"

"That's not enough, Harry." James turned away, burying his face in his hands. "Even if we were released right now, the taint would cling to us and follow us around. No one's going to hire me now. Everyone's going to think your mother some kind of madwoman, and

Dumbledore.” He gave a harsh laugh. “The war’s coming, Harry. Albus wrote me about that. How do you think we can fight it now, with the leader of the Light side in prison for child abuse? This is horrible. It’s all horrible. Our lives are utterly destroyed.”

Harry bowed his head. I knew this would happen. Damn it, why did I let them tell Snape about the compulsion? I’m sure that that was what pushed him into acting now.

“And our family life, you boys’ childhood, will be all over the papers,” James was saying, each separate phrase hooked out from the back of his throat. “Did you think about how this would affect your brother, Harry? Why did you tell anyone about what happened at Godric’s Hollow? We’re all smeared with shit now, and it’s all your fault—“

“Silencio.”

James’s voice cut off. Scrimgeour lowered his wand and turned Harry around. Harry let himself be turned. He barely felt it. He was tingling and going numb with shock.

“What he said was untrue,” said Scrimgeour calmly. “Utterly. Come with me, Harry.” He lifted his head, and Harry didn’t see what expression was on his face as he addressed James, since he couldn’t seem to stop himself from staring straight ahead. “You are charged with neglect, Mr. Potter,” said Scrimgeour. “Charged. I am going to look over the evidence that Professor Snape laid before me more closely. I find myself, after hearing this little speech, unable to believe that neglect is all it is.”

He turned and guided Harry out of the room, his hand never faltering. Harry shivered, and followed.

The truth had hit him along with James’s words, or perhaps because of them, like a block of stone falling on his head.

There is no way back. Their names really are smeared now. The dragon is flown. The firestorm is burning.

All I can do is help them ride out the storm as best I can.

And I need a safe place to think about these things and plan out my strategy. Hogwarts won't do right now.

Harry broke into a fit of shivering. Scrimgeour said nothing, but handed him over to an Auror Harry didn't know, with soft instructions to wrap him in a warm blanket, give him chocolate to eat, and return him to Hogwarts.

Harry didn't really remember how he got back to the hospital wing; his shock was too great. He did know that Draco was waiting for him, and a second figure who, on examination, turned out to be Narcissa.

Harry nodded at her, and faced Draco, who checked himself sharply at the sight of his expression.

"I've decided to come to Malfoy Manor for the summer," said Harry. "If I'm still welcome?"

Draco at once hurried forward and clasped him close in his arms, whispering to him. Harry looked at Narcissa, who nodded.

Harry closed his eyes and held on fiercely to Draco. He didn't think he could bear to see the pity he knew must be in Narcissa's eyes. She knew, but he doubted she would press him about things the way Snape would have, and the Manor was quiet and isolated enough for him to think.

And Draco would be there.

I can't keep this firestorm from burning, but perhaps I can tame some of its winds.

Chapter Three: He Stands Not Alone

Narcissa rubbed her fingers gently over the back of the small wooden dog she held, and watched her son embrace Harry. Harry embraced him back, and Narcissa supposed that was a good sign.

His cheeks still bore the red-brown traces of dried blood, and his eyes were glazed and stunned and staring. But even those could be cleansed; even those could be healed. Narcissa's concern was whether he would recover in enough time to meet the Dark wizards who had agreed to ally with him, or at least the first seven, who had all grown subtly more pressing in the last few weeks.

I do not know if he will. Narcissa gave a little shiver of mingled excitement and disquiet as she thought about what Harry had done in the past, and then about the memories that Severus had sent her. But living in uncertainty like this is more exciting than I would ever have given it credit for.

Harry at last gently pushed Draco away from him, and faced her. "Did you come to take us to the Manor, Mrs. Malfoy?" he asked.

Narcissa watched him for a moment. His eyes didn't lose their glazed look, but neither did they waver. So. He was not yet letting himself collapse and relax, but neither was he curled up and shaking against his will. She would follow his cues, then, and not say everything that she wanted to say until they were back at the Manor.

"I did," she said. "But I also found this. I thought you might be interested in it." She extended the toy with a solemn look.

Harry took it with a confused expression at first, but then, awkwardly manipulating it with the fingers of his single hand, managed to turn it over. When he read the letters carved on the belly, he took a quick breath and looked up at Narcissa.

"This is him," he whispered. "It has to be. Thank you."

Narcissa nodded, smiling. She had thought to look at the toys she fetched from Wayhouse herself, to see if the Dark Lord might have

left any distinguishing marks on them, and encountered the dog with R.A. B. carved on its belly. Perhaps the Dark Lord had done that for his own amusement, perhaps simply to be able to find the toy again, but it was too great a coincidence for one of the toys to have Regulus's initials. At least they could begin the work on re-Transfiguring there.

"I'm not that good at Transfiguration," Harry was saying regretfully, rolling the dog in his fingers now. "I'll have to take this to Professor McGonagall—" He paused as though remembering something. "No," he said softly. "She's Headmistress McGonagall now, isn't she?"

"She would be, yes," said Narcissa carefully. The more she saw of Harry, the more concerned she became. She was not sure how much taking him to the Manor would help. He looked like a fragile collection of glass shards held together around an iron rod. She was not sure if he would let himself collapse. But if he fell apart against his will, or if he met Henrietta Bulstrode so obviously weakened...

"Then let's go see her, and congratulate her on her new position," said Harry, with such a straight face that Narcissa didn't recognize the morbid joke until her son smothered a stunned laugh. Her worry grew as she followed Harry out of the hospital wing and towards the Headmaster's office.

He needs rest. How to convince him to take it?

Yet he didn't look as if he needed rest with his face turned away from her, Narcissa noticed. His stride was firm and strong, and he walked with his head held high. He glanced at the walls they passed now and then, as if he were estimating the strength of the wards and protection spells that crawled over them. Narcissa wondered if he was only acting.

Or perhaps they trained him to change his own weariness into strength, to keep going even when he was on the brink of collapse.

The anger that had been burning in her since she read the scrolls Severus sent tried to roar up again. Narcissa took a deep breath and carefully placed a lid over the embers. The anger could do her no

good right now; she stood a chance of breaking in a different way, but no less disastrously, than Harry if she tormented herself with those thoughts. They would wait.

They reached the gargoyle, and Harry murmured the names of several sweets before it leaped aside. Narcissa wondered if McGonagall hadn't had the time to change the password yet, or if the old Head of Gryffindor House also preferred the same ridiculous ones as the former Headmaster.

The former, child-abusing, deceptive Headmaster...

Narcissa banked the fire again. In the end, it would burn longer and hotter, and be put to better use, for having been balked for a time. She rode the moving staircase up behind Harry and Draco, and watched the way her son leaned towards Harry, and wondered. Lucius was assuredly right in what he planned to do about Harry's abuse. She did not think he was right in the observations he had made to her on Draco the other day.

They knocked on the door of the office, and a tired voice answered, "Yes, I'm here. That's you, isn't it, Harry?"

Narcissa flicked a suspicious glance at the ceiling, and only then saw the glow of the green watching spell in the corner above her. She shook her head. She really should have seen it at once. She drew her wand and held it loosely at her side as Harry opened the door. Her last meeting with the old cat had not been pleasant.

The office looked strangely altered, though Narcissa had only been in it a handful of times as a student, and only once as a parent. And anyway, it had only been a few hours since Dumbledore was arrested, as Draco had told her when he firecalled; why would McGonagall make her first priority changing the decorations?

Who knows why Gryffindors do anything? Including abuse their children—

This time, Narcissa told herself, firmly, that she simply wouldn't think about it until they returned home. This anger felt creeping, insidious,

worse than anything she'd experienced before. In fact, it felt more like the madness that sometimes ran in the Black family and which her mother had warned her about than any normal anger. She had to ignore it, and therefore, she would.

McGonagall stood up from behind the desk when she saw them, though Narcissa thought that was less a gesture of courtesy and more so that she could have her wand out and freedom of movement if she needed it. Her eyes fixed on Harry's face first of all, and she made a faint noise of distress.

"Mr. Potter," she said softly. "Your face is covered in blood."

"My scar bleeds when I dream about Voldemort, Headmistress," said Harry, ignoring the way McGonagall started at the title. "I came to ask you for a favor." He held up the wooden dog. "This is Regulus Black, Sirius' brother. He betrayed Voldemort, but he got caught and Transfigured, and no one knew what he got made into until just a few days ago. Can you work on changing him back?"

McGonagall was blinking and staring throughout this, but to her credit, Narcissa thought, she took the dog from Harry and gently smoothed her fingers over the wood. Then she closed her eyes, and her face altered, becoming the sharp, focused expression that Narcissa remembering seeing in countless Transfiguration classes as she examined botched student work. Narcissa had never been that good at Transfiguration.

She shook her head, telling herself that she was no longer eleven, and she should no longer let that look intimidate her.

"Yes, this is a Transfigured human," McGonagall was murmuring. "But the spell is hooked to several powerful Dark Arts curses that would affect anyone who tried to undo the change, and there are preservation spells, too, I assume to keep him alive while they tortured him. If I don't pay attention to keeping them intact, he'll come back wounded and bleed to death." She set the dog gently on the desk before she opened her eyes. "I can change him back, Mr. Potter, but it is not the work of a few days, or even a few weeks. It will take months."

Harry paused, and then said, "That's all right, Headmistress. I can live with that. I'll bear it."

McGonagall took a deep breath, and Narcissa recognized what she was going to do, but not in time to prevent it as she leaned forward and said, "Just as you have borne everything else that happened to you so far, Harry?"

Harry stiffened. Then he said, "Not in the same way, Headmistress. We found Regulus after a long quest and looking in several other places. I got resigned to it taking some time."

"That is not what I meant, Harry," said McGonagall. Narcissa would not have thought a Gryffindor could be so merciless. "I have read the memories Severus wrote out. You have been ignoring much of what happened to you. If you had told me in your second or third year what the Headmaster had done, I would have helped protect you. I swear it. He lost my respect almost two years ago now. I would have helped."

"That's not the point," said Harry. His voice had gone high and strained. "Please, Headmistress. I appreciate your concern—" Narcissa snorted; no, he didn't. McGonagall's gaze flicked to her, but went back to Harry as he continued. "—but there's really nothing anyone could have done before this point. And I know that you're busy with the school. That's another reason I'm not going to be impatient with your changing Regulus back. Merlin knows you have a lot to do." Narcissa leaned forward in time to catch the edge of a bright, brittle smile on his face. He was fighting back the emotions that wanted to rampage across his body.

"Harry," said McGonagall softly.

"I don't wish to speak of it," said Harry. "Isn't it enough that I'll have to do so in public in a few months, whether I want to or not?"

McGonagall looked stricken, but Narcissa felt a tiny flicker of relief, both at the words and the way that Harry edged closer to Draco, reaching out one arm for support. At least he can admit that the trial

is going to happen. I would be worried if he thought he could somehow turn the juggernaut Severus has released aside.

“You are right, Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall stiffly. “Where are you going for the summer, if I may ask?”

“With the Malfoys,” said Harry. “I know that Connor is going with the Weasleys. I’ll visit him soon. I have—lots of things to say to him.” He stared at her for a moment, then said, “And I feel like I should have more to say to you, too, Headmistress, but I don’t. Not right now.”

McGonagall simply nodded. Then her eyes looked up and caught Narcissa’s over the boys’ heads. Narcissa sneered at her. It was infuriating that this witch—no longer young, no longer pretty, and not even of the Dark—could make her feel as if she had four legs and a hairless tail with just one look.

“If you hurt him,” said McGonagall softly, “I will Transfigure you into a mouse and set you loose in the castle.”

She didn’t need to say that she would find Narcissa in that form, or that Mrs. Norris would. Narcissa simply nodded, and then waited for the boys to pass her before she left the office. She wanted to remain between them and the Headmistress, just in case.

She studied Harry’s back worriedly the whole time. Already, he had let the strain fall from his shoulders and moved a bit away from Draco. He was chattering animatedly with her son, but, like his smile in the office, that mask shone too brightly and was liable to shatter.

What should I do?

Put off the others until Harry is ready to face them, of course. Until he’s had at least a few days to recover.

Narcissa felt much better once she had made that decision, and a little ashamed that it had taken her so long to make it. Of course her family came first, and Harry was important to her family, and important to her in and of himself, and half-adopted already, with the

linking to the wards that Lucius had given him at Christmas. The other wizards and witches were pressing, Henrietta Bulstrode in particular, but she could dance around them and make excuses for at least a few days longer. And she would do so, until Harry was soothed, or had shattered and then drawn himself back together again.

What most worried Narcissa at the moment were two things: that she did not know how long it would take Harry to work through his emotions, and that she did not know how to get through the wards into the Ministry to punish Harry's parents and Dumbledore as they deserved.

In some ways, I wish Severus had not gone to the Ministry. It would have made it easier to kill them.

On the other hand, perhaps that was the exact reason Severus had done it.

Narcissa fixed her eyes on the two boys walking ahead of her. I promise, Severus, I will guard Harry as if he were my own. In many ways, he already is.

"Draco. I would like to see you alone."

Draco stood up at once from the chair in the library where he'd been reading the book about basilisks, and put the tome down on the table beside it. He followed his father out of the library without a backward glance, because Harry wasn't in the room with him. Harry was asleep in his bedroom upstairs, exhausted from another day of researching every subject that occurred to him—means to get the last few remaining Dark spells off the stump of his wrist, ways to counteract basilisk poison, powerful glamour incantations.

The interrogation techniques that Aurors used with abused children.

Draco had bitten his lip when Harry found those books, but he'd said nothing. He'd had a lot of practice at silence in the last few days, since Harry returned from the graveyard. He helped Harry when Harry let him, and when Harry asked to be alone, he left him alone,

and when Harry reached out for him—more and more frequently now—Draco was there. It was three days now since they had come home to the Manor, and Draco had done all those things multiple times.

It was for Harry, of course it was, Draco thought, as he followed his father into the study where Lucius and Harry had spoken the first Christmas they met, but it was also for himself. He'd had the sensation, over the last week, of watching pieces of his mind and soul shift and float and lock into new places. It was—rather strange, like watching an outside force change him, but Draco knew this wasn't Harry's magic, or even the news of Voldemort's return. It was the events around him interacting with what made him who he was, and the most magical thing about it was his awareness of the process and his determination to hold back and watch it rather than interfere and consciously change his mind.

“Sit down, Draco.”

Draco took the high chair that Lucius waved him to, noting with a distant pleasure that his feet reached the floor now, where they would have dangled a few inches off it last summer. His father paused with the most mild and fleeting of disconcerted expressions on his face, as though he had found himself caught by surprise at the same sight, and then went smooth-faced again and sat down in his own chair.

Draco calmly fixed his eyes on his father. Lucius was tall and imposing. He was the man Draco had loved and adored and been in awe of and feared since the days when he first became aware that he should keep silent around some people and talk to others. He had always been closer to his mother. She was more prone to let him know when he crossed an unbreakable boundary, but always treat him as if he behaved well otherwise. Lucius, meanwhile, often looked as if he were waiting for Draco to break one of those unwritten laws of good manners and pureblood behavior.

The thing was, Draco was fifteen now, and he no longer feared his father.

"You made a request of me some little time ago," Lucius began. He always did this, too, approaching most subjects so obliquely that an outsider to the family might have blinked in confusion as he listened. But Draco was not an outsider to the family. "I find myself moved to grant it, as long as you tender me an apology for the argument that we had at the same time." He sat back and put his fingers gently together, watching his son.

Ah. I'd thought so.

Draco tilted his head. "I find myself not much inclined for either the giving or the receiving of gifts at the moment, Father."

Lucius's nostrils flared, the only sign that Draco had just taken him by surprise. He remained silent for a short time. Draco knew this tactic. It was meant to fluster and disconcert him. But he didn't have to be flustered and disconcerted if he didn't want to be.

He'd always been stubborn when he thought he was in the right, but then, that had been a kind of frantic stubbornness, similar to Harry's at the moment. The shifting of his soul in the last week had taught him patient stubbornness, rather like a stone. Panic and fear did no good when you were sitting by the side of the man you loved and watching as he slept off massive trauma.

Lucius said at last, "I was under the impression that you rather wished to have the request you made of me granted."

"I did," said Draco, letting his father hear him emphasize the past tense ever so slightly.

They watched each other. Lucius could easily have broken the dance and asked him outright what had changed, and then Draco would have told him. But his father had started this waltz, and no matter what he might say about pride getting in the way of accomplishing one's goals, the fact remained that Lucius Malfoy was proud and stubborn and far too used to getting his own way to ask an honest question when he'd begun obliquely.

Draco could move the waltz ahead, though, and he did. “Was there anything else that you wanted of me, Father? If not, I should go back and research basilisks. Fascinating creatures, basilisks.”

His father’s mind was obviously searching and sorting through his words, looking for some way in which they could be a threat. Then he gave a slight, sour smile, and tilted his head.

“Yes, Draco, by all means,” he said. “Did you know that in some of the legends, basilisks have green eyes, and in some, golden?”

“Then I’ve been in a room with both kinds at once,” said Draco, standing and striding out of the study. “How fascinating.”

His thoughts briefly swirled and stormed, representing the Chamber of Secrets to him, before he shoved them firmly back down. He had things to do.

He went to Harry’s bedroom and eased the door open. The sound of soft breathing from the bed didn’t stir. Draco liked that, liked that he was the only one who could approach Harry without waking him up. His mother had tried it a few times, but even she made Harry turn his head and at least regard her before he went back to his book or his nap.

Draco sat down in the chair next to Harry and shook his head. Harry still hadn’t allowed himself to heal. He was ignoring every mention of his parents and Dumbledore, slipping Narcissa’s every attempt to talk about the memories she’d received from Snape, and simply refusing to acknowledge why he was researching the common signs of abuse and how people found out about them.

But that was what Draco had expected. He knew Harry better than any of them did, after all. Harry faced many other things bravely, but from things like this, he went on running until he could run no more. Last time, he had run until Hawthorn Parkinson forced her way past his barriers and he collapsed in exhaustion. Everything else so far—Draco’s attempts to hold a conversation with him, the unicorns, the soothing atmosphere of the Manor—was only a temporary relief. He would have to fall further before he could land. Draco knew it.

Draco closed his eyes, and reached out gently towards Harry with his empathy. He wasn't here to confirm things that he knew already, but to take note of a change that had happened in the past few days.

Yes. He was right. There was still the stinging sensation of pain from Harry, but it was muted, compared to what it should have been. Draco had likewise noticed that the emotions that represented winds from Harry had changed to breezes, and that he didn't know the meaning behind some of Harry's minor expressions or quick changes of mood at all anymore.

His empathy was changing, just like everything else about him.

Draco opened his eyes and regarded Harry thoughtfully. He had more sympathy for the person Harry had been during second and third year than he had ever had while the transition was actually happening. How did you go through a transformation like that and keep your sanity?

Of course, it helped that Draco wasn't fighting his change and trying to stay the person he had been the way Harry had, and that he could step back from his emotions, thanks to his training in the dances, and regard himself as an interesting object. He did not think that would have been possible for Harry, who either tried to ignore himself entirely or followed well-worn paths of guilt and self-loathing.

Whatever his empathy was mutating into, Draco did not think it was altogether a different form of magic. He had noticed that, while he caught fewer emotions from his mother and father and Harry, he seemed to sense their selves better. He had known, the other day, just what book his father was looking for, and that his mother was sitting in her room and reading over the scrolls of memories from Snape again when he wondered where she was, and that Harry was going to take a step to the left before he actually did so. It was odd, and interesting, and Draco was looking forward to seeing where it went. At the moment, he thought it too caught in flux to give him any useful information.

He closed his eyes, and thought about the settled things, the things he did know.

The past week had brought home to him how firmly he was not Harry, for all that he loved Harry and would have given his own left hand to save his. He would not have dealt with these losses as Harry had done. He would have let Madam Pomfrey see the wounds the moment he got back to Hogwarts. He would have wept to express his grief, which Harry had very rarely done so far. He might have had trouble denouncing his parents as abusers, if that had happened to him, but he would be more accepting of the reality than Harry had shown himself even now.

He was different.

And—perhaps this was another part of the change that had started in his soul when he saw Harry coming up the path next to the lake with Fawkes on his shoulder—he found that he wanted to know himself, his own motives for doing things. Just loving Harry wasn't a good enough reason any more. Yes, he loved Harry.

And?

Could he actually become a good fighter, an asset in a fight for his own abilities, rather than just someone Harry had to protect or someone who learned Dark Arts and dueling spells to protect Harry? Could he become interested in magical creatures for their own sake, and not just because Harry worked to free them? Could he find some way to share Harry's life that didn't involve subsuming himself in him?

He had wanted so badly to achieve equality with Harry, so that Harry would never overshadow him and they could stand on equal footing. But why should he worry about that, if he was simply going to drown himself?

He had one point at which he differed from Harry. He would find others—or he would find points of similarity and work from there. He wanted to have his own life, just as Harry did, even as they shared a life.

Draco didn't plan to tear himself from Harry, of course. Far from it. He would know himself, and he would know Harry, and he would be conscious what they shared and what they did not. He thought it would be the most interesting study of his life so far.

And when he was ready, he would break free of the cocoon of silence that had held him for the last week, and start pushing—both against people who might try to do things that shoved at him, like his father refusing to acknowledge Draco as a magical heir of the Malfoy family until Draco apologized for attending Walpurgis Night, and at Harry, from whom Draco had the right to demand some consideration, too.

He thought he would be ready soon.

He rather suspected that some people would be surprised when he opened his wings.

Wings. That's right.

Draco stood, brushed his hand over Harry's shoulder, and then turned and strode from the room. He had a letter to send, to confirm the order for Harry's birthday gift, that he had nearly forgotten about. Lucius shook his head as he finished his letter. The owl he used for delivering ordinary messages, Octavius, waited patiently in the corner of his private study as he bound the note to his leg.

"To Ollivander," he said, and Octavius spread his wings and soared out the window.

Lucius watched him go, his hands folded behind his back. His right hand was clamped down on the left, that was true, pressing until Lucius could hear the bones grind together, but someone else coming into the room would only have seen him standing calmly. That was as it should be. Lucius put on a performance for an invisible audience most of the time, so that he could put on a faultless performance for a visible one when he needed to.

He had read one more scroll of the memories Snape had recorded. He read one a day, and had almost reached the end.

His right hand pressed down further, and Lucius knew there would be dents in the skin afterward. He would cast a glamour to cover them.

Some years ago, during the first war, the Dark Lord had sent Lucius and two other Death Eaters to capture Ollivander, wanting the wand-maker to himself. Unfortunately for the Dark Lord, those were the days of chaos when his attention was mostly occupied elsewhere, and Lucius had had a long-running grudge against the Death Eaters assigned to accompany him—one neither of them knew about. He had waited until they had entered the shop and he was sure that all their attention was on Ollivander, and then had dispatched them smoothly with a Killing Curse to the back of each.

Ollivander had thought Lucius had done it to save his life, and therefore he owed him a wizard's debt. Lucius had hardly wanted to discourage the impression, keeping it in reserve as a favor he might use someday, and had even helped the wand-maker make it look as if he had fled before Lucius and the others arrived. The Dark Lord had just fought a battle against Dumbledore, and had accepted the report. Compared to destroying Dumbledore, Ollivander was a low priority.

Lucius had never found a use for the wizard's debt.

Until now.

His right hand pressed down insistently, and Lucius felt his lips part in a slashing smile. Acceptable, now that he was alone, and he had wards on the study that would have chimed in a moment to let him know if his son or wife had entered the hallway outside the door.

He had wanted vengeance when Narcissa told him about the loss of Potter's hand, but he had wanted to think his target over carefully. Narcissa had claimed her sister, as she had the right to do, and planned to keep her alive, torturing her delicately, drawing out the kill to give her as much pain as possible, inflicting more and more debilitating wounds as time passed. Lucius approved. He would do the same thing, but he had to figure out which one of his former comrades would give him the most pleasure.

Then had come the memories, and the news, from Snape, that Potter's parents and Dumbledore would be arrested for child abuse.

And Lucius's rage had shaped itself into a knife pointing straight at his targets.

Lily and James Potter.

There were some things one did not do. Lucius supposed some of his enemies might have laughed at the thought of a Death Eater having morals, but he did, of course. He honored his family, and he knew that older blood was better, and he disdained murder and torture that did not serve a cause.

And he knew that child abuse was wrong.

One did not torture one's children. Love for the children argued against it. Magic argued against it. The most basic common sense argued against it. Perhaps a Muggle could get away with abusing a child—Lucius did not really care to know what Muggles did, and for all he knew, abused Muggle children were as common as doxies—but not a wizard.

The family would be shattered. The family was supposed to be inviolate.

The children might react by losing most of their magic, if they were harassed and suppressed so much that they became quiet and cringing. Many supposed Squibs in the pureblood lines centuries ago had come fully into their magic once their abusive parents died, their power roaring up in them when they had the time and space to breathe. The laws against child abuse had originally come about for that reason.

Or the child might lash out, turn, turn dangerous. Wizarding parents should never forget they were raising potential wizards and witches. Lucius had seen the remains of parents whose children did not turn meek and cringing. Narcissa herself had been called home to help her cousins Capella and Canopus, Sirius Black's parents, when their

son turned on them at last. She had come back white-faced and silent, but, once she could speak, gleeful. Lucius had listened to the description of their wounds with the keenest sense of justice imaginable.

And now...this.

That someone would abuse a child with Lord-level power was beyond comprehension. What would happen if he turned on them? For that matter, what would happen to the rest of the wizarding world if once he lost his temper, or even came into his power unexpectedly, late in life, uncontrolled?

From the information that Lucius had silently collected on Tom Riddle's background in the last few months, he could guess at the answer—and Riddle had been more neglected and not thought of than abused. It was a wonder that Potter had not become a monster.

And the waste, the sheer and utter waste. When any Dark pureblood family would have welcomed a child like Potter with rejoicing, would have lorded it over their friends and relatives with constant smugness, and would have snapped up the chance to adopt him and make him their own son if he had been free before this, the Potters had turned their backs on him and tried to interfere with the natural expression of such rich, deep magic. It was enough to make Lucius sick with fury.

Lucius was not unconscious of the fact that his son loved Potter, and that the boy could easily become part of their family, and that he already half was, with his links to the Malfoy wards. But that only made what he had chosen to do all the sweeter, since he could claim the privilege of revenge for himself. In any situation, at any moment, in any way, this would have been something Lucius would have risen against in his mind.

He would get one chance at Lily and James Potter, he thought, and no more, rather than the multiple ones that Narcissa planned to give herself with Bellatrix. The risk was too great to enter the Ministry many times. He would have to make it count. Rather than giving them one wound, and then returning to give them an even more devastating one, he would have to concentrate many rounds of

torture into a few hours, and then finish things off with a curse that would kill them slowly, undetectably.

He knew how to do it. The books on medical magic waited patiently next to his chair.

He would need them, he found with mild surprise when he turned from looking out the window again. He had broken his left wrist with his pressing on it, and so great had been the haze of his anger that he had not noticed the pain.

Interlude: Special Order

To: Tertius Serpentigena

Coluber House

July 3rd, 1995

Dear Mr. Serpentigena:

This is simply a letter to confirm my order placed on the twenty-second of April. I had not heard anything from you since the original letter acknowledging that you had an Omen snake on hand, a laying female. Just to make matters clear, I wanted to request a young Omen snake, and neither an egg nor an adult female. All my research has made it clear how much depends on the young snake having his or her own mind before their choice of a partner is complete. An egg hatched by a certain person will result in an Omen snake too attached to that person, and most adults have chosen already, or never will. The need in this case is for a companion, a friend, not a mindless servant or a distant adviser.

Please acknowledge my letter, and inform me that you have such a snake on hand in Coluber House. If you do not, I must ask that you return the half of the payment I have given you directly.

Sincerely,

Draco Malfoy.

To: Draco Malfoy

Malfoy Manor

July 8th, 1995

Dear Mr. Malfoy:

I do indeed have several young Omen snakes on hand. My laying female's latest clutch has hatched, and I have been looking over the

brood to see which would be most suitable. I have three females and one male, all a month old and very intelligent. Which one would interest you most?

Sincerely,

Tertius Serpentigena.

To: Tertius Serpentigena

Coluber House

July 11th, 1995

Dear Mr. Serpentigena:

For several reasons, a male snake is more desirable. Enclosed please find the second half of the payment, and I look forward to your delivery of the Omen snake no later than the morning of July 31st.

Sincerely,

Draco Malfoy.

Chapter Four: The Potter Alliance

Harry blinked, then blinked again. Somehow, of all the arguments he'd envisioned having with Narcissa Malfoy, this hadn't ever been one of them.

"But I could Floo over," he said, trying his most charming smile. Narcissa just gave him that long, slow look that told Harry she managed to see through most of his deceptions, and put down the scroll she'd held on the table. Harry's eyes darted to it, and then away again when he recognized Snape's handwriting. He did not ever want to know what Snape had written on those scrolls. Just looking at them, being reminded they existed, brought back the sting of betrayal more keenly than ever.

"The Weasleys have likely closed off access to their Floo Network except for utmost necessities," said Narcissa. "It is not inconceivable that your brother as well as you could be in danger from Voldemort, Harry, and they would know that."

"But the Burrow's protected by wards," Harry said. He knew that; Connor had reassured him of it when he said he was staying with the Weasleys for the summer. "We're not going to be in danger. I could send them an owl, and ask them to open their Floo at eleven or so, and I could go."

Narcissa shook her head, making her unbound hair ripple over her shoulders. "That's true. We could do that. Where is my mind today?" she murmured, massaging her forehead. Harry ventured no joke, because he was afraid of the answer. "However, I will still make sure the Aurors know where you are, Harry, and when you are likely to leave the Burrow, even if you will not permit them to actually escort you there. That way, you will have extra protection while you're outside the wards of Malfoy Manor."

Harry shook his head. "With all respect, Mrs. Malfoy—"

"Please, Harry. Call me Narcissa."

Harry nodded uncertainly. "All right, Narcissa," he said. "Will all respect, I don't see why the Aurors would be interested. They've got other things to do."

A strange expression crossed Narcissa's face. Harry regarded it suspiciously. He'd managed to survive the few days he'd been at the Manor by using his familiarity with Lucius and Narcissa's expressions and movements to guide him in what he should say and do. Draco was the only person he didn't have to do that with, which made him more relaxing to be around. Now Harry wondered if he hadn't spent too much time relaxing. Not knowing what Narcissa would do next left him feeling as if his stomach was disintegrating.

"The Aurors are part of the case against your parents, Harry," said Narcissa quietly. "They are watching the Manor in rotating pairs, and they asked to be informed if you went anywhere else. They want to protect you against people who might throw themselves at you, either in accusation or in misguided sympathy. I think my niece and Auror Mallory are on duty now. They've both been here far more often than any of the others."

Harry felt himself fighting the urge to squirm. He fought it off successfully. "All right, then," he said. "I'll send the Weasleys an owl, and ask them to open their Floo at eleven. I'll come back at three. Is that acceptable, Mrs. Malfoy?"

"It's acceptable," Narcissa murmured, and this time the expression was familiar—a sad one—but Harry could see no reason for her to be wearing it. He shied away when she reached out towards him. Narcissa sighed and placed her hand gently back in her lap. "Very well, Harry. Let me fetch you parchment and ink."

"I can get it myself. Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy." Harry smiled gratefully at her and went back to his room. He had two letters to write, two for Hedwig to deliver, and he would rather not have anyone know that he was sending the second one.

Harry stepped uncertainly out of the Burrow's fireplace. He wasn't sure what to expect, but it wasn't for his first sight of the house to be Molly Weasley's shoulders as she grabbed him and hugged him firmly.

“Oh, Harry,” she said, as she held him. Harry just barely managed not to kick and struggle and get away. Lately, most embraces did that to him, causing a rushing feeling of disorientation and panic. “Oh, we were so sorry to hear what happened. I still can’t believe that Albus...that Lily...I knew her in the Order, and she was so different...oh, Harry!”

And so on, until finally, when Harry thought an acceptable amount of time had passed, he pushed back a bit, and Molly let him go, tears streaming down her face as she sniffled. She leaned past him to close down access to the Floo, giving Harry a moment to both steady himself and survey the kitchen of the Burrow.

The cheerful sounds of the Wizarding Wireless Network slid across the kitchen, though at the angle he stood, Harry couldn’t see where they were coming from. Most of the room was taken up by a scrubbed table, with chairs shoved close around it. None of the people sitting there were talking now, instead turned towards him, with their expressions caught somewhere between solemn and hesitant, as if they didn’t know what they should say to him, but knew it had to be something grand. Ginny was gnawing her lip, the twins were staring steadily at Harry, and an older Weasley brother, with slightly longer hair than normal and a fang dangling from one ear, was sipping at his tea in deliberate swallows.

Molly broke the awkward moment by turning around again and sweeping Harry further into the room. “Well, you know Ginny, of course, Harry, and Fred and George. And this is my oldest son, Bill.”

Harry nodded cautiously to him. Though he hadn’t seen an updated list of Order of the Phoenix members in several years, he thought he remembered Lily mentioning that Bill Weasley was one. He wondered if Bill would be angry with him for getting Dumbledore sacked and imprisoned.

“Hello, Harry,” said Bill. If he was angry, there was no way of telling it. He stood and extended a hand, which Harry took. He made no attempt to turn it into a hug, and for that, Harry was extremely grateful.

“Heard about what happened to you. Awful,” he said simply. Harry relaxed a little further.

The twins whispered to each other, then one of them said, “We’ll go fetch ickle Ronnie and Connor. They didn’t think—”

“That you’d be on time,” finished the other, and they slipped out of the room.

Molly patted Harry’s head a few more times and shed a few more tears, then ordered Harry to sit down at the table so she could prepare some tea for him. Harry sat down and tried not to watch her. Narcissa never did her own cooking, of course, with house elves to do it for her. But Lily always had.

“Harry?”

He glanced up and met Ginny’s eyes. She had stopped gnawing her lip, and looked committed to whatever she was about to say. Harry braced himself. At least, once she had made an expression of sympathy or anger, it would be over, and then he wouldn’t have to listen to it anymore.

“I’m glad you came,” said Ginny quietly. “I think that Connor needed to see you, and you really look like you need to see him.”

Harry nodded.

“And I’m not going to say anything about your parents,” said Ginny. “They’re your parents, not mine.” She gave Harry a strained smile, then turned and followed the twins.

Molly had just plopped down a cup of tea in front of Harry, with an injunction to “Drink the whole thing, young man!” when Connor entered the room, with Ron a few paces behind him, at his right shoulder.

Harry hastily used his magic to levitate the teacup over and apparently hold it cradled in the glamour of his left hand. Connor was

advancing with a fixed expression, and had seized his right hand tightly.

“Harry,” he said.

Harry found his throat closed. If he hadn’t wanted to talk to his brother so badly, he would have been prepared to dismiss this as a bad idea. As it was, he would just have to keep things going.

“Connor,” he said, after a cough, and glanced at Ron. Ron just gave him a look that had too much understanding in it. Harry lowered his head. “Is there some place where we can talk in private?” he asked.

“Harry!” scolded Molly. “You haven’t finished your tea yet.”

Harry hunched his shoulders. He didn’t like all this pressing closeness. He wanted to run from it, to go someplace where no one could see him and he could hide for a time. Draco had been letting him do that at Malfoy Manor lately. Harry did not know how he was going to get through four hours here.

Abruptly, Harry’s cup wavered and lurched and spilled on the table. Bill put down his wand, looking extremely surprised.

“Well, that was clumsy of me,” he said. “I was trying to bring the kettle to me, but I got Harry’s cup instead.” He winked at Harry as his mother went on a tirade that included the words “earring” and “no sense” and many another familiar topic about which she had apparently just been waiting to scold Bill. That gave Harry and Connor an opportunity to sneak out through the door. Ron remained behind, though Harry could feel his eyes every step of the way.

In the Weasleys’ garden, the shimmer of isolation wards was visible, more than familiar to Harry from the long childhood spent in Godric’s Hollow. Connor sighed and stuck his hands in his pockets, closing his eyes. As was usual with him over the holidays, he wore Muggle clothes, not robes.

"I love the Weasleys, but sometimes they get to be a little much," he said. "And you looked like you were about to vomit or something." He threw Harry a cautious look. "Are you going to start, or should I?"

Harry found that he had to start, because there was one question that he needed to ask above all others. "I can understand Mum, and even Dumbledore," he said. "But why did you show that letter from Dad to Snape?"

He had expected astonishment, or hurt, or perhaps some self-righteous tirade about how much James deserved it. He had not expected Connor swinging around and gripping his arms, staring hard into his eyes, nor for his anger to be a diamond-edged rage.

"Because I'm sick and tired of the way he wavers," Connor said, every word grinding out between his teeth. "He never makes up his mind permanently. Something always happens to change it. He was perfectly content to live with Lily until he found out about the abuse—"

"Connor, don't call it that—"

"I have a perfect right to call it whatever I want." Connor's chin lifted. "I was living in that house, too, and it happened to me, too."

Harry tugged fretfully against the hold his brother had on his arms. "But he was trying to reconcile with us."

"I haven't finished yet," said Connor. "Then he couldn't even make up his own mind, even when you used the justice ritual on Lily's magic, and he knew you'd used it. He had to go through the Maze to make his decision. And then his resolve to be a good father lasted—what? A month, I think."

"Longer than that—"

"You're forgetting that he never wrote to you while you were with Snape last summer." Connor lifted his head and tossed it like an impatient horse, making his fringe fly off his scar. "Because he was childish, and wanted you to write him first. And he just had to write insulting letters to Snape, didn't he? Now, I don't think Snape's an

adult either, really, but James should have known better, if he really was the kind of man he said he was after the Maze. And he didn't. And he kept on not knowing better. He tried to take you away from Snape without even asking if you wanted to be taken away, and then repaid your healing him with filing charges against Snape."

"But that's one of the things that makes this so bad," said Harry, determined to get a word in edgewise. "That it was Snape who filed the charges, I mean. Dad thinks this is just some part of a great scheme against him, that Snape did it out of revenge."

"Well, yes, he would think that," said Connor dismissively. "Because he's a self-centered prat who never grew up."

Harry stared at his brother, well aware that his mouth was hanging slightly open. "But you love Dad," he said. "And you've never liked Snape."

Connor blinked a bit, then abruptly let him go and whirled away, kicking at the ground. He managed to get a gnome who was just peering out in the head, and it uttered a thin little scream and ducked away. Harry kept still, staring at his brother's back, knowing he had done something wrong, but not sure what.

"How dare you," said Connor evenly, looking over his shoulder, "think that I can't recognize right and wrong because of that."

"I never meant to suggest that!" Harry protested. All the words out of my mouth are wrong lately, unless I'm speaking them to Draco. I can't convince Snape to drop the charges, and I can't convince Scrimgeour to do it, either, and I couldn't convince Dad that I didn't intend for this to happen. "I only meant to say that I didn't know you'd do this. And he was getting better, Connor. He really was. Remember the way he was concerned for us at Easter? And you should see some of the letters that he wrote me after the Second Task in the Triwizard Tournament—"

"And then he turned against you again," said Connor, "when you went to the Ministry the night they were arrested."

“How did you know about that?” Harry asked.

“I’m keeping in contact with Scrimgeour and the Aurors,” said Connor. “I’m interested in the progress of this trial, Harry, and I want to know everything I can about the procedures. You do realize that they’ll want to interview us before the trial actually begins? A few times, probably. Child abuse cases are very delicate. They’ll want to know what details we can speak about in public and which we absolutely can’t. I think Madam Shiverwood of the Department of Magical Family and Child Services will probably do it herself. After all, this is the family of the Boy-Who-Lived. Very high profile.”

Harry nodded slightly. “I guessed that.” It was the reason he’d been reading the books about interrogation techniques he’d found at Malfoy Manor. He would know what Madam Shiverwood was looking for, what signs would convince her he’d taken trauma from the abuse, and he planned to not display them. He knew he couldn’t stop the trial from occurring, and he couldn’t change the fact that they knew about his training now, but he could soften the blow. There weren’t many people who knew how he’d been affected by that training. The memories Snape had written down were only memories, and prejudiced by his perspective besides. If Harry could show he’d come out of those memories completely untraumatized, then he might encourage the Wizengamot and anyone who advised them, like Madam Shiverwood, to leniency.

He wouldn’t let them make him into a victim. He wouldn’t.

“Harry?”

Harry lifted his head and blinked. He hadn’t realized he’d been standing in the middle of the Weasleys’ garden staring at his feet. Nor had he realized that a beetle was zipping around his head, wings fanning his face purposefully, until he saw Connor’s amused gaze. The isolation wards didn’t keep animals out, Harry supposed, which was how his owl had been able to get through them.

As it happened, he’d sent a letter to Rita Skeeter asking her to come to the Burrow around noon in her Animagus form.

“Connor,” he said softly, “I have to do something important. Will you please go inside and leave me out here?”

Connor narrowed his eyes. “Harry—“

“I promise it doesn’t involve Apparating to the Ministry and trying to free Mum and Dad and Dumbledore,” said Harry, with a smile that it hurt his face to give. “Nor does it involve hypnotizing myself to forget everything that happened in the past fourteen years. I know there are Aurors watching me, and I’m not going to try to get away from them. I just want to talk with someone. Please?”

Connor sighed, and nodded at him, and then gave him an abrupt hug that ended before Harry thought to pull away from it. “I wish you would accept more comfort than you let yourself,” he said, giving Harry a sad look that Harry couldn’t meet. “And, in fact, just to answer your question about James, yes, I do think he was trying to reconcile with us. But then he would have just turned away again the next moment some great pressure came and sat on him. He’s not dependable, Harry, and he’s a party to child abuse. That’s more than enough to convict him.”

Harry didn’t respond, though the beetle let out a shrill, high-pitched buzz that Harry could almost imagine was prurient interest. Connor didn’t seem to be waiting for an answer. He just nodded at Harry and walked towards the door of the Burrow, though he paused to add, “Don’t be too long, Harry. Mrs. Weasley makes the most fantastic meals.” He wore a dreamy expression as he shut the door behind him.

Harry immediately paced behind one of the thick old trees, so that Skeeter could change back without revealing she was an Animagus to do it. The reporter was walking beside him a moment later, patting at her thick blonde curls as if to make sure they hadn’t managed to tear themselves free. Her acid-green quill and her notebook were already hovering beside her.

“You had a story for me?” she asked Harry, staring directly into his face. “I suppose that you want to give your personal perspective on the story your brother spread around?”

“In a way,” said Harry, grateful again that he’d made Skeeter’s acquaintance. “I do want to give you an interview, or an article if you think that would do more good than an interview, and have you print it.”

Skeeter snorted and sat down on the tangled grass that covered the bank of a large pond. “Either would do plenty of good. Everyone’s going mad over this story. Honeywhistle grabbed the front page from me today, but she’s not going to do that all the time. I just have to get a unique angle or something no one else knows, and we’re off to the races.” She looked expectantly at Harry.

Harry nodded as he dropped down opposite her. “Then the interview. You ask me some questions, and I’ll give you honest answers.”

He could see Skeeter’s nose twitching, like the nose of a rat who scented cheese, and suspected she wanted to know why he was doing this. But, in the end, reporter’s curiosity proved too much. Besides, he could almost hear her thinking, it would get her the front page. Why should she care how she got it? Her newfound commitment to truth wouldn’t have limited her ambition.

“All right, then. How do you feel about the abuse being front-page news?” Skeeter asked.

Harry concealed a flinch as best he could at this evidence that Skeeter, too, was misunderstanding the situation. But that was why he’d sent his letter to her. He wanted everyone to know the real truth, and this was his best chance to do it.

I wish you wouldn’t do this, Regulus whispered in his head. He wasn’t often there anymore, and he sounded exhausted when he was. He said that Harry’s refusal to see the truth wearied him. You know she’ll refuse to print it.

No, she won’t, Harry thought at him, and told Skeeter, “It’s horrible. I don’t like the attention. And what makes it even worse is that everyone is misunderstanding the situation.”

Skeeter's eyebrows shot up eagerly as her quill dashed across the paper. "What do you mean by that, Mr. Potter?" she asked, in a soothing, professional voice.

"I wasn't abused," said Harry.

Skeeter paused. Her quill stopped scribbling. She frowned at Harry as if he were an unknown species of beetle who'd flown up and tried to communicate with her while she was in her Animagus form. "Yes, you were," she said.

Merlin, not her, too. Harry kept his face still, though. Even if Skeeter privately believed something different, he knew that she could spin the truth. They'd done it successfully after Fudge had abducted him. "No, I really wasn't," he said. "Do you know what the purpose of my training was?"

"Is that what you call it?" The quill made a note, which caused Harry to relax. They were back on track now.

"Yes," said Harry, "because that's what it was. My brother is the Boy-Who-Lived, you know—of course you know that—and my parents were worried that Voldemort might come back and kill him. So they trained me to help protect him." He winced at this betrayal of one of his old vows, but that was, essentially, one that had got broken when he was still a student in first year. "I had powerful magic, and I wasn't the Boy-Who-Lived. I could help. So that was what the training was about, and of course it was strict. After all, how do you make a child understand that life and death are at stake if you aren't strict?"

Harry was proud of himself for that. He'd got to the end of the speech without his voice wavering or breaking. He sounded as if he were fondly amused with himself, rather like a parent. He looked up to meet Skeeter's eyes.

Skeeter hadn't written anything of his speech down. She sat back, with her arms folded, and she was glaring at him through her ridiculously large glasses.

"I'm not publishing that," she said.

Harry swallowed. "But it's the truth."

"It's how you see things," Skeeter corrected him. "I've heard and seen the most awful things about your past, Potter. You were abused. Even that article you gave me to blackmail your father with showed it. I didn't know anything for certain then, or I would have gone ahead and pushed and exposed it." For a moment, a dreamy expression covered her face. "That would be something, to have discovered it all by myself," she muttered, and then shook her head. "The thing is, I do have morals, even if you don't think I do. And I can recognize child abuse, because I've covered cases of it before. True, the parents are usually slapping the children around or raping them instead of—this. But this is still abuse, Potter."

"You said that you would print an interview with me." Harry clung to the slender threads of hope he'd first spun when he summoned Skeeter here. This was one of the few chances that he might have to influence the course of the trial in public. Most of the people around him would be howling for blood and refusing to acknowledge the nuances of the situation. Even Draco didn't agree with him about those nuances, though Harry only knew that from long, slow looks that reminded him of those long, slow looks of his mother's. "And that's what I really believe. I promise you."

"It's what you believe because your parents and your Headmaster trained you to believe it," said Skeeter, and now she was looking straight at him, and there was pity in her eyes.

"No, it's what I believe because that's who I am," Harry retorted, stung. Do they really think I'm no more than a mindless puppet of my parents? That rather diminishes the heroic light they want to cast me in. "And because I was the one who lived through it. I ought to know what I went through if anyone does."

"Abused children are often among the last to recognize their situation," said Skeeter, as if she were quoting a long-established truth. "I'm sorry, Potter. I'm not going to print what you just told me. The most I could do with it would be to print that you believed it, and no one else would believe it with you."

“My parents and the Headmaster must have allies—“

Skeeter snorted. “And do you think that they’re getting an airing right now, Potter? Yes, there are some people who will testify on their behalf. But this is news. The respected Headmaster and Light Lord an abuser of children! James and Lily Potter, whom everyone was sure must have been model parents to have raised the Boy-Who-Lived and the Young Hero—“

“Merlin, I’m not—“

Skeeter ignored him. “And it turns out they’ve been savagely abusing their children all along. No.” She stood. “I suppose that you might be able to change people’s minds in a short time, but not now. And I’m not going to be the one to help you change them. Your parents and Dumbledore deserve everything they get.”

“Skeeter—“ Harry could not believe she was doing this. Yes, he could see her point about covering child abuse cases in the past, but he had been sure that once he explained this wasn’t really a child abuse case, she would be amenable to doing as he asked. It would help her, too.

“No, Potter,” she said. “Talk to someone else about this. I won’t prevent that.” She made a disgusted noise deep in her throat. “As if I could prevent Honeywhistle and the rest from rolling dung every chance they get, anyway,” she said. “But I won’t join them anymore. I made myself a promise about a year ago, and I’ve kept my word so far. I’m not going to either make you look more like a victim than you are or like less of one. I want to print the truth, Potter, and there’s plenty of that still left.” She nodded at him, and then faded into her beetle form and was gone.

Harry sat in silence, staring at his hands, both false and real. A rustle of wings obscured his vision a few minutes later—at least, he thought it was a few minutes later—and Regina, Narcissa’s owl, landed beside him.

Harry unfolded her note with a feeling of dread, only accented by the sharp strokes with which Narcissa had written it.

Harry—

I did the best I could to keep them off until you were recovered, but seven of the wizards and witches from the alliance list I've created are here. They're willing to wait until you return, and only one of them, Henrietta Bulstrode, insists on meeting you outside a common introduction. But they're tired of excuses, and they're going to be looking for blood.

I'm sorry. I know this is very far from the best day.

Narcissa Malfoy.

Harry nodded to Regina, said, "No response," and watched as she climbed back into the air. He stared at the sun until his eyes watered and ran from that, and that only. Then he stood and walked back into the Burrow.

He would live. He would get through this. He would bear with the trial, and the Weasleys, and his new allies, and all that they could throw at him.

And if one tactic for convincing people of the truth failed, then he would just try another.

"Mr. Potter. I'm so happy to meet you. I've been waiting a long time."

Harry held his chin up as he extended his hand. He had got through lunch with the Weasleys, as well as an impromptu game of Quidditch and "invitations" from the twins to try out their latest jokes, on sheer willpower. At least, with this woman, he could use the formal pureblood dances to bolster him. "Merlin's smile on you, lady," he murmured. "I am sure I must have been waiting a long time to meet you as well, though I did not know it."

The woman walking across the anteroom to meet him buzzed like a swam of locusts, her magic lifting around her as she smiled. Harry

would have known at once that she was trouble, even if her reputation hadn't preceded her. Her magic was either as strong as Auror Mallory's or not a good deal weaker. And she moved with the graceful, easy stride of a predator, fully in tune with her magic and confident of its possibilities.

Henrietta Bulstrode, Harry remembered as she took his wrist and he lifted her hand to his lips, was Adalrico's second cousin—and thus distant enough from his immediate family that the alliance Harry had made with Adalrico, Elfrida, Millicent, and Marian didn't affect her. She was an astoundingly forceful woman, and if she didn't get her will one way, she would another. She'd never been a Death Eater because she killed three of them when they tried to recruit her.

Harry could remember being told that, but not that Henrietta was beautiful, with dark red hair on the edge of black and brown eyes like severing curses, and obviously used to using the beauty to get her own way. Or that her gaze flickered across Harry's face and read several clues there that lit her expression with a fire Harry recognized. He'd last seen that flame burning behind Dumbledore's eyes. Henrietta Bulstrode was an emotional manipulator, and would try to use any knowledge he gave her as a weapon, to better secure her own position.

No wonder Narcissa, standing politely in the far corner of the room while Henrietta introduced herself, looked so strained.

And no wonder that Henrietta began at once. "I was so sorry to hear about your parents, Mr. Potter," she murmured. "That must have been hard, to have everyone finding out about the abuse all at once."

Harry tensed, and did not let her see it. This would be shattering. After he greeted Henrietta, he had to go into the room behind her and meet his other new allies, as well as Hawthorn Parkinson, Adalrico and his family, and Arabella Zabini.

You'll survive. It's what you do best.

"The hardest thing was the betrayal," he said. "To have my guardian give them up. I don't like traitors much."

Henrietta gave a quiver like a hunting hound straining against a leash, obviously eager for this dance to begin. "I should hope that you would never have to fear them again, Mr. Potter," she said, as he let go of her hand.

Unless you're weak enough to deserve to fear them.

Harry could hear the words, and knew she knew that, and suppressed the urge to run away somewhere and hide his head in the sand. He wanted to curl up in Draco's arms and sleep for a week. He wanted to cry. He wanted to just let the gathered pieces of himself collapse to the ground and wake up from this living nightmare.

But that was not going to happen. So he twisted his mind to meet the brutal dance that was upcoming.

"I do not fear traitors," he said, giving the verb a light garnishing of emphasis that Henrietta would pick up. "Shall we meet the others, Mrs. Bulstrode?"

"In the Potter Alliance, you mean?" Henrietta had a small smile on her face. "Of course. Lead the way, Mr. Potter." She could inflect her own verbs ironically, too, Harry thought.

He nodded to her, and went towards the sitting room where his allies awaited him, prepared to dance among knives.

Chapter Five: Change As the Winds Change

This room was not one that Harry had seen before, or perhaps it only looked different with so many people crowded into it. Harry didn't have time to stare at the walls and figure that out. He was much too busy studying the people in the room with him, seated just far enough apart around a delicately carved wooden table to avoid crowding, and deciding whom he knew and whom he didn't.

Hawthorn Parkinson was sitting on the side nearest him, her head turned to study him with intense hazel eyes. Harry knew part of their ferocity came from the impending full moon, and perhaps another part from seeing Henrietta Bulstrode behind him, but he feared at least half came from those memories she would have read. He dipped his head and looked carefully away from her.

The foot of the table, including one empty chair they must have left for Henrietta, was a mass of unfamiliar wizards and witches. Harry made out two other women, one of them marked by a springing mass of red curls, and four men, all of them dark-haired and more or less calm. Next to one of the men sat a dark-haired boy, bolt upright and staring at Harry with undisguised fascination. A slender, pretty girl had a chair behind another of the wizards, and close by the empty one was a girl at least a few years younger than Harry, her hands clasped together and her eyes on the floor. Harry nodded once to all of them in a general introduction, knowing he would have to meet them individually in a few short moments, and turned his attention to the other side of the table.

Oddly, it was a gaze from that direction that nearly broke him. Oh, not Lucius Malfoy, and not Arabella Zabini's solemn look, and not Adalrico or Millicent. It was Elfrida Bulstrode, cradling a small shape on her arm that could only be her daughter Marian. Her eyes held a world of compassion that implored Harry to relax without making him feel as if she pitied him.

Harry looked quickly away. He didn't want to seem rude, but, on the other hand, the last thing the alliance could afford was to have him break down because he badly wanted to talk to Millicent's mother alone.

"I am very pleased to meet you," he said, lifting his chin. "My name is Harry Potter, as you will know by now, elder son of Lily and James Potter, elder brother of the Boy-Who-Lived."

"Son of a neglectful pureblood and abusive Muggleborn," said Henrietta, just loud enough that it was hard to tell who had heard, as she slid past him to resume her seat at the bottom of the table.

Harry had been prepared for her to say something like that, though—he had her measure now—and simply inclined his head, perhaps responding to her comment and perhaps not. "Some of you I know already," he said, and turned to smile at Hawthorn. "Mrs. Parkinson. I hope you have rested well in the wake of recent events?" He wasn't sure how many people here would know about the death of her husband Dragonsbane, and he wasn't about to expose it if she'd chosen to hide it.

"I have, Mr. Potter," said Hawthorn. She had long since started calling him by his first name, but that was in front of more trusted allies than these, Harry thought. Right now, she would not appear to weaken him by calling him anything familiar. "Thank you for asking."

Harry nodded, and then looked over at the Bulstrodes, deliberately meeting Adalrico's eyes and not Elfrida's. No one would think that strange. Elfrida was puellaris, devoted to the protection of her children, and deliberately supposed to appear timid and meek in public. Certainly the other allies would not expect her to take the lead in anything that happened today. "Mr. Bulstrode. I hope that I find you, your wife, and your heirs well?" It was no exposure to say that Marian was a magical heir, either; she must be, or she would not have been here.

"You do." Adalrico was staring searchingly at him, as if looking for weakness. Harry raised his chin. Search as you will, sir, you will not find it here. I am determined that I will not let you down.

"Good," said Harry, and moved on to Arabella Zabini. She had her hair done up in bells to prove that she was a Songstress—or so Harry assumed, since the bells were both larger and made of richer metal

than he had seen her wear at Walpurgis Night or the Halloween meeting last year. “Mrs. Zabini. I was saddened to hear about the raid on your home. Are you any closer to catching the perpetrators?”

“I do believe that I know who they were.” Arabella gave him a charming smile. She was a beautiful woman, though Harry wondered how anyone could be lovely enough to snare the seven husbands she’d poisoned. “And my vengeance will take them when I am ready. Thank you for asking, Mr. Potter.”

Harry nodded at Lucius, and then turned to face the wizards and witches he did not know. “Sirs, madams,” he said. “Mrs. Malfoy tells me that you are willing to ally with me. But I know only names on a list, and very little about who you are and what you stand for as yet. If you would introduce yourselves?”

He turned to the wizard sitting closest to Lucius, who stood up at once, with a faint smile on his face as he examined Harry. His hair, eyes, and skin were all dark enough to suggest some ancestry not entirely British, which Harry had confirmed as soon as he murmured, “Thomas Rhangnara.” He glanced at the girl sitting behind his chair. “And this is my daughter and magical heir, Rose.”

The girl curtsied. Harry cocked his head at Thomas, whom he knew was the descendant of an Indian wizard who’d fled to Britain more than a hundred years ago. “If you don’t mind my asking, sir, I was unaware that your family claimed any particular allegiance to Light or Dark. What changed your mind?”

“I’ve spent most of my life trying to understand the difference between Light and Dark,” said Thomas simply. He still hadn’t stopped smiling, though his smile had a dreamy and more thoughtful edge to it now, as though he were thinking of something other than just the conversation in front of him. “And now I’ve finally decided that the Dark makes more sense.” He turned his hands up in front of him, as though he were surrendering, but the glow in his eyes said that wasn’t it. “Did you know that Merlin most probably united Dark and Light qualities within himself? And that no formal philosophy of the Light was formed until the middle of the thirteenth century, with no formal philosophy of the Dark coming until later? That—“

“Father,” said Rose Rhangnara, laying a hand on her father’s arm and giving Harry a look somewhere between embarrassed and apologetic. “I don’t think that Mr. Potter wants to hear all about your studies. He has other people to meet, after all.”

Thomas blinked, then smiled at his daughter, a more “present” smile than the other one he’d used. “You’re right, of course, my dear. Sorry,” he added to Harry, and then sat down.

Harry was breathing more easily than he’d expected as he turned to the next wizard in line. He thought he might like Thomas Rhangnara, though admittedly, the man might be the kind of distant philosopher who valued lives less than books, and that could cause problems.

This next wizard, from the white streaks in his dark hair, was older, enough that he evidently felt he could nod to Harry with a slightly condescending look on his face, and didn’t need to rise. “Edward Burke,” he declared, then paused as though to let Harry make the obvious connection. When Harry said nothing in the next moment, Burke prompted, “Grandson of Herbert Burke, who married Belvina Black.”

Harry made a slight “ah” noise under his breath, even as Regulus sneered in his head. Of course he wants to claim some connection. The Burke family is hardly distinguished enough on its own to merit anyone’s notice.

Who’s being a proud pureblood now? Harry snapped back at him, and nodded slightly to Burke. “We’re honored to have you, sir. You are Declared Dark, I take it, and eager to renew your participation in politics?” One thing he knew for certain was that Burke was no Death Eater. He didn’t get the slight tingling buzz in his scar that he did when he focused on Adalrico, Hawthorn, or Lucius.

“Yes.” Burke frowned at Harry a bit. “And I have been most unfairly ignored, I must say. I was an Auror until Scrimgeour sacked me for using a bit of Dark magic on a prisoner. And until young Narcissa remembered me, I thought I would end my days in isolation. Really, anyone who approaches me and has the benefit of my experience

would be gaining an invaluable ally, but not many people in the last twenty years have realized that.”

Very proud, Harry noted, in the corner of his brain where he remembered things like that. Handle him with care. “I shall remember that, sir, and I’m sure that we’ll call on you for many things as the months go by,” he said smoothly, and then faced the young witch who sat at Burke’s side even as he nodded in satisfaction.

This witch grinned at him. She had golden curls favored with the slightest touch of red, and incisive blue eyes, and a lion pendant hanging around her neck. It wasn’t until Harry concentrated on it that he realized the pendant was a glamour. It glittered as realistically as it should have, were it really made of silver, but it passed through the top of her shirt instead of bouncing off it as she stood and made him a little impromptu curtsy.

“My name is Honoria Pemberley,” she said. “And because I think that you must be tired of pompous speeches already—it doesn’t take much to get me tired of them, I know—I’ll just tell you everything that you need to know about me in short bursts.” She rattled the next words off, as an illusion of a crown came into being above her head and then melted away in shimmers of gold and silver that became dancing serpents on her shoulders. “Gryffindor when I was in Hogwarts. Half-blood; my mother is a Muggle.” Burke gave her a startled look and edged an inch away from her, which Honoria ignored merrily, though one of her illusory snakes stuck its tongue out at him. “Experienced illusionist, as you can see. Declared Dark because someone told me once that no halfbloods were ever Dark, which is just stupid.”

Harry stared hard at her. She caught his eye and flicked her own gaze towards his left hand. Yes, her face said, she knew, but she wouldn’t tell anyone. Unless it would be more fun that way, maybe.

Harry nodded cautiously back. He wasn’t sure how far he could trust her.

“Tybalt Starrise sends his regards, by the way,” Honoria added. “He’s one of my best friends.”

That only increased Harry's unease. Tybalt Starrise was not the...steadiest wizard in the world. Still, this meant that Honoria had connections with both Light and Dark families. That could make her useful to the alliance in the future.

"Welcome, Madam Pemberley," he began.

"Call me Honoria, please," said Honoria, and flicked her hair over her shoulder, at the same moment as two small bears stood up on her shoulders to dance. "Madam Pemberley is my mother, and I wish her joy of the title."

There's a story there, I think, Harry mused, but nodded. "Welcome, Honoria. I hope you find plenty of entertainment here," he couldn't help adding.

She grinned at him and sat down again. Henrietta was next, but she only nodded coolly to the girl sitting behind her.

"Mr. Potter and I have already met," she said, managing to make it sound like a special privilege instead of something she had arranged. "But he has not met my daughter Edith, my magical heir. Edith, stand up and curtsy for Mr. Potter."

Her voice held the snap of someone expecting instant obedience, and Edith did indeed obey at once, trembling a little as she stood. Harry didn't think she could be more than thirteen, and he was certain that she must attend Durmstrang or Beauxbatons, since he'd never seen her at Hogwarts. Her eyes rose to his face, huge and wondering, and then slid away again as her mother commanded her back to her chair with a subtle pinch to her elbow.

Harry was already certain, as Henrietta Bulstrode sat down and focused on him, that he did not like her very much.

He moved past the awkward moment by looking at the thin and very neatly attired wizard next to Henrietta. He just bowed his head an inch, without bothering to stand up. His face had a cultivated bored expression. His eyes were green, Harry thought, or that shade of blue

that could shift to green with the right light. His hair was dark and bound with a curling serpent of silver.

“Mortimer Belville,” he said, and then paused, as though that should be enough for Harry to know who he was.

Harry simply nodded, not revealing his private thoughts. His mother had told him of the Belvilles, a mostly older family, with Mortimer their only heir. Mortimer was Snape’s age, and had never married or joined. He seemed to like the thought of playing around and teasing his older relatives with the prospect of the family line not continuing until he was in his fifties or so.

He had also fled the country during Voldemort’s War—no, during the First War, Harry supposed he must call it now. Taken no stand at all, and exhibited neither courage of conviction nor of principle. Harry supposed he could think of him as sensible, but he didn’t think he could trust him to stand firm.

Well, needs must when the nundu comes prowling, he thought, and nodded to Mortimer. “Mr. Belville,” he said. “I have heard much about you.” He left Mortimer looking pleased, though Henrietta appeared an inch from laughter, and focused on the red-haired witch.

She stood and gave him a different bow than the others, her hands clasped in front of her as though cupping a bowl of water. “Ignifer Apollonis.”

Harry knew that he blinked and stared, but he couldn’t really help that, either. It wasn’t every day that he met someone his mother had used to frighten him with childhood tales of—someone who had been reared Light, in one of the oldest and proudest pureblood families of Ireland, and then turned to the Dark when she was nearly twenty.

Ignifer’s hair was red, her eyes golden, and her English very slightly accented with something that didn’t sound like the usual Irish lilt. Harry supposed there was some truth to the idea that the Apollonis children were taught to speak Latin before any other language. She stood very straight when she recovered from the bow, and Harry

could see no trace of any sense of humor in her face. He supposed she was another person he would have to handle carefully.

He thought for a moment, and found the greeting words that were used for a powerful, potentially unfriendly Dark witch met under unfamiliar circumstances. "May you have dark water and stones, my lady, to quench your thirst and test your strength."

The faintest of smiles crossed Ignifer's face, like sunlight in midwinter. "Thank you, Mr. Potter," she said, and then sat back down, evidently pleased that he took her as a Dark witch, without pausing to question her Light heritage. Harry doubted the impression would last long, though. Ignifer struck him as too inflexible for that.

"Mr. Potter."

Harry turned to look at the last wizard, the one with the boy behind him. He had dark hair and eyes that looked familiar, though Harry couldn't say why until the wizard rose, bowed, and said, "Charles Rosier-Henlin." He did look something like a saner Evan Rosier.

Charles straightened back up and locked eyes with Harry in an intense, testing gaze. Harry felt the brush of Legilimency, and bounced it off without thought, using a milder Occlumency shield than usual, just so that he wouldn't bruise his ally's mind. Charles blinked, but turned without explanation to introduce his son. "This is Owen, the elder of my twin boys and my magical heir. You wouldn't have met him. He's attended Durmstrang all his life."

Owen nodded to Harry. Harry thought he was a year older than himself, but he too obviously had to subdue awe. "Heard about what you did in the Triwizard Tournament," he murmured. "Wonderful, Potter." He looked away again the moment he could politely do so.

Harry hoped he hid a frown. He didn't want the kind of constant, subtle testing from his allies that Henrietta seemed prone to, but neither did he want cringing or fawning. Why they couldn't simply be equals, true allies, was beyond him. His own power was set off by his youth and the stories circulating about him right now.

"Welcome, sir," he told Charles. "And I hope to know your son better. Do you play Quidditch, Owen?"

That brought Owen's head up in startlement. "Beater," he said, without thinking about it, and then flushed. "You?"

"Seeker for Slytherin," said Harry, with an encouraging smile. "Though probably not half as good as Viktor Krum. I saw him at the Quidditch World Cup this past summer."

Owen relaxed a bit, and nodded. "And doesn't he know that he's good! I'm almost glad that he'll be gone this year, even though it'll make our trainers harder on us all, so that we can have another player as good as he was."

Harry clucked his tongue. "I know all about that," he said, thinking of the way Snape had encouraged him to play Quidditch, and win, against his will. These memories were distant enough that they didn't cause him as much pain. "Sometimes we forget it's supposed to be a team effort, I think, with all the focus on individual positions."

"Funny," Henrietta murmured, a touch of poison in her voice. "I hadn't thought that we came here to discuss Quidditch."

Owen flushed, and Charles snapped his head to the side to glare, but Harry was actually grateful that she'd interrupted there rather than elsewhere in the conversation. It made a graceful segue. "No," he said equably. "But we came here to discuss a team effort, Mrs. Bulstrode, I think."

He turned and took the chair at the head of the table, beside Narcissa, silently calling for Fawkes as he did so. The phoenix alighted on his shoulder with a croon a moment later, and Harry scratched his feathers, smiling as he noticed that Burke, Henrietta, and Mortimer had all jumped, but that Owen was staring at the phoenix in fascination, and Honoria in delight. A moment later, the illusions around Honoria began to swarm with red and gold flames just the same color as Fawkes's feathers. Fawkes squawked at her, and Honoria opened her mouth in a soundless laugh.

“We came here to discuss our alliance,” said Harry, raising his brows and looking from face to face as he waited for an interruption. He found none ready and waiting, so he nodded. “We may as well do so.”

It was getting harder and harder for Hawthorn to sit on her anger and worry.

Since she had read the memories Snape had sent her, she had wanted to kill something. The urge only grew worse as the full moon came nearer, and the wolf inside her joined its voice to hers, whispering, urging her on a quest for blood and raw flesh, preferably still screaming as it went down her throat.

Hawthorn wanted to rip apart Harry’s parents for what they had done, and Headmaster Dumbledore for what he had done, and anyone who had had anything to do with the concealment of this, and she had believed that she knew what rage was when she felt this emotion.

But no, she hadn’t. She didn’t know what rage was until she watched Harry walk into the meeting room at Malfoy Manor and confront his new allies.

She could only stare and murmur a few inconsequential words when Harry greeted her. She was nearly sick with the scents of pain and exhaustion and panic swarming around him. Sometimes, having a werewolf’s nose was a blessing, but not this time. She knew exactly how much Harry needed to rest, and it was distracting her during a very important time.

That wouldn’t do.

By the time Harry had worked his way around the table to Honoria Pemberley, Hawthorn had got control of herself back, but that just meant she had more room to focus on Henrietta Bulstrode and snarl a bit. She didn’t trust the woman. She wasn’t sure why Narcissa had included her in her recruitment efforts, save that she was too powerful to be ignored.

Calm, Hawthorn ordered herself sharply. You're thinking and reacting as though Harry were your own son, instead of your leader. He needs your support now, not you snapping out of your chair because you're angry every time someone acts like the witch or wizard you know they are. That means that if Henrietta challenges his authority, you come up with plans to help deflect her challenges.

But it was hard, it was very hard, to watch Harry take his place and know how badly he needed help—and that he couldn't show any of that, lest someone should take advantage of it and use it to harm him.

Perhaps this is what was missing from my alliance with Voldemort. The thought darted unexpectedly into Hawthorn's head as the phoenix appeared on his shoulder and Harry began to speak. This feeling of actual protectiveness, love, comradeship. I know that we told Harry the wizards and witches who follow and protect someone with Lord-level power are supposed to be companions, not just the mindless lackeys Voldemort made the Death Eaters into, but I didn't know I would ever feel this so strongly.

She found some comfort in that idea, though it would have been easier without the wolf in her head snarling blood, kill, murder them, bite them...

Harry could see no better way to start than with honesty. There were some things that he would need to conceal, of course, but what he could tell, he should. That way, any of his new allies—he couldn't help flicking a glance at Henrietta—who were dissatisfied with the way he saw things could abandon him now, without claiming they'd been deceived and becoming traitors.

"First of all, just to clear up any misconceptions, I am not going to become a Dark Lord," he began. "I'm not going to Declare for either Dark or Light, and I'm not going to become a Lord. And I am fighting Voldemort." Most everybody still flinched at the name, save the people who had been Death Eaters. Harry noted that. He wouldn't want to use it too often, but as a weapon to throw people off balance, it could be useful. "If you do need to follow a Lord, or you entertain some hope of compromise with that madman, then you need to leave the alliance."

He paused. No one made for the door. Of course, these were Dark wizards and witches accustomed to seeking advantage wherever they could find it, with perhaps the exception of Ignifer. He was not going to flush them out so easily.

So he went for another tactic.

"I don't intend for my war against Voldemort to be reactive, either," he said quietly. "I will carry this on the offensive." He was getting stares even from his long-time allies for that declaration, Harry knew. He supposed it came from their knowledge of his past and their assuming he would be preoccupied in dealing with that. Well, they were wrong. He would not let the people who were so eager to make him a victim define him that way. "I have an advantage that will allow me to do that."

He waited a moment, wondering who would ask it.

"What is that advantage?"

Arabella Zabini. Interesting. Perhaps she does not trust me completely yet, despite what Narcissa told me yesterday about her allying herself more firmly with me. Harry chose his words very carefully. This was the most dangerous part of what he had to do, and if he became caught in an obvious lie, his allies would distrust him at best. "I have a—connection with one of the Death Eaters who has left the Dark Lord's ranks," he said. "Evan Rosier is his name."

Charles leaned forward sharply. "You cannot trust my cousin," he said. "He is completely mad."

"Mad, to be sure," Harry agreed, "but it is a riddling madness. He scatters clues in the letters he writes me, and he cannot stop writing me those letters. It's a sort of compulsion with him. He did warn me, outright, about what would happen in the graveyard where the Dark Lord resurrected himself, and even told me the nature of the magic he would use. I did not interpret another of his hints the right way, or I should have been forewarned."

“What good are clues that you can only know about later?” Henrietta Bulstrode asked, her voice a drawl, her eyes half-lidded. “Unless you bring the letters to your elders, of course, and have them interpret them for you.”

Harry held onto his temper. It was easier than Henrietta seemed to assume it was, from the way she taunted him, and drew attention to something obvious—his age. She did not consider him a very formidable opponent yet.

Shall I disillusion her?

“He has left the Dark Lord entirely now,” said Harry. “He turned in the graveyard, and tried to kill Bellatrix LeStrange. He didn’t succeed—”

“Nor will he,” said Narcissa. “Bellatrix is mine.”

She wasn’t making that declaration so much to him, Harry surmised, as to the rest of the wizards and witches. Glances flitted from face to face, and heads were bowed, and Harry simply nodded to Narcissa and continued in the middle of that glancing and thinking.

“He has sent me another letter since then. That one enabled me to prevent the death of Rufus Scrimgeour.”

“That is something we really must settle, Potter.” Burke, unsurprisingly, frowning at him. “Why are you on such good terms with the Minister? He’s a Light wizard, and you know they’re all treacherous bastards—”

“Who are, nonetheless, grateful to the people who help engineer their elections.” Harry raised his eyebrows. Time to move a bit on the offensive, I think. “Or did you not read the papers last year, Mr. Burke? After Minister Fudge kidnapped me, Rufus Scrimgeour was one of those who supported me throughout Fudge’s trial and the trial of my guardian. Scrimgeour knows that he owes a good deal of his success to the way I testified at the first trial. And if he has done me favors in return—well. They weren’t necessarily favors that strict Light wizards would approve of.” Harry shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t

think you'll have to worry about Scrimgeour. The newspapers would have told you that."

Honorina laughed outright at the expression on Burke's face. Ignifer, though, shifted, and drew Harry's eye to her before she spoke.

"And what about what the newspapers are saying now, Potter?" she challenged. "About your abuse by your parents, and Albus Dumbledore? Can we trust you to bear through all of that just as casually?"

At least she's direct, Harry thought, and reached deeply into the reserves of his will and strength, using them to paint an indifferent, almost bored expression on his face. The best thing he could do was to show that this didn't matter to him. In fact, it would be good practice for the dancing he intended to do around Madam Shiverwood and others who might question him. Show no marks, and it would frustrate anyone who looked for wounds.

"Of course," he said. "The timing is damn inconvenient. I could have wished my guardian would wait. I have a war to fight." He shrugged, while Ignifer stared hard at him, and met her gaze for gaze. "I consider myself a warrior first, as well as vates for the magical creatures," he said quietly. "But since he didn't wait, then I will handle it. I have a chance now, finally, to show everyone that I'm not just an appendage to my brother, the Boy-Who-Lived, and not just prone to occasional newsworthy events, either. The former Minister took me for a child last year. That was his mistake." He lifted his eyebrows and flicked a glance up the table. "I would hate to see anyone here make the same mistake."

Thomas Rhangnara nodded as if impressed. Arabella Zabini lowered her eyes, frowning thoughtfully. Edward Burke pursed his lips. Most of the others sat immobile and blank-faced.

Not Ignifer, of course.

"You're an abused child, Potter," she insisted. "You must be aware that most of the wizarding world will see you that way."

Harry forced himself to smile. He hoped that it wasn't too bright, wasn't too brittle, but he could only hold onto it and hope. It was beyond him right now to make absolutely sure that his smile was convincing, and he didn't know the minds of his new allies well enough yet to realize what would allay their doubts beyond another murmur.

"They'll see me that way," he said, his voice just above a breath. He could sound more confident like that, especially when he forced them to lean closer to hear him. "That doesn't mean I'm really that way, does it? Someone can think a diamond a piece of quartz all he likes, but that doesn't mean the diamond will shatter when he puts it under a compression spell."

Ignifer subsided, apparently satisfied. Adalrico Bulstrode immediately took up the thread of the same conversation, though, as if he wasn't.

"Potter," he said hesitantly, "you must know that we, at least, would follow you down much further than you have gone so far." He glanced at the rest of the table, and explained, "Potter saved my wife's life and power when she drained herself to make Marian her magical heir." He turned back, and Harry forced himself to meet that dark, burning gaze. It was harder than with any of the others, since he knew one of the flames behind that gaze was frantic concern. "But that means that you must be strong enough to lead. Are you truly that way?"

Harry curled his lip. I told you, look as hard as you can, and you will find no weakness in me. "I am, Mr. Bulstrode," he said, keeping his voice curt. "The war is the important thing to me, and the revolution I intend to introduce once I have enough consent from both wizards and magical creatures to make it a reality. The future, not the past. I have no intention of looking back until I must, and then I'll deal with the husks of my parents and the Headmaster, and go on."

He concentrated on Adalrico's face until he nodded, reluctantly, and then looked around the table again. "Does anyone else have anything to say?"

No one apparently did. Harry passed on to outlining the first of his plans against Voldemort.

“The Black estates are ours, thanks to an ally whom most of you will eventually meet—“

Hinting at me? Regulus mocked him. Refusing to talk about me outright? I’m hurt.

Shut it, you. “And I plan to use at least a few of them as bases in striking against Voldemort. The magical weapons within them will also prove useful, once we can train in them. I believe that we can even lure Voldemort into traps using the rumors of them. If he thinks that anything can harm him, he will want to capture or neutralize it. We must not underestimate the power of rumor...”

Hawthorn shook her head as Harry went on outlining his plans. They sounded good. Of course they did. The boy had obviously thought about this, and he did have some natural touch of leadership when he chose to apply himself. He led best when no one was reminding him that he led.

But she had seen the gazes that passed from eye to eye, even as Harry engaged in his staring contest with Adalrico, and she knew that not everyone was as convinced as he would like them to be. For that matter, Hawthorn herself did not think the trials were a mere inconvenience to him.

We are not following simply an abused child, she thought, as she studied Harry and compared his confident words to the scent of pain and turmoil flooding from him. But we are following a leader who will not allow himself to rest. I very much fear that he will run himself to death before he attends to his own wounds. Someone must make him face that truth.

I am not sure who could.

Hawthorn sighed, and returned to listening to her wolf. At least bloodthirsty thoughts of vengeance filled her with more cheer than the fact that Harry was bleeding and would not stop for bandages.

Intermission: Four Wizards, Three Witches

The clash of skillets greeted Charles as he stepped through his fireplace with Owen beside him. He wasn't surprised. Medusa would have tried to cook while they were gone, because she had the odd idea—acquired from one of the thousands of books upstairs—that it was the duty of a pureblood wife to cook dinner for her husband when he went to a formal alliance meeting.

And then, of course, Michael, who despised his mother's cooking, would have crept into the kitchen and stolen one of her pans, so that she would be forced to leave it up to the house elves.

Charles held a finger to his lips, which Owen understood. He grinned, then followed silently behind his father as Charles went to the door of the kitchen and peered around the wall.

Michael and Medusa, sure enough, were dueling with their skillets while all around them agitated house elves tried to keep pots from boiling over and half a dozen different baking projects from burning. Michael laughed openly, his dark hair falling across his eyes as he leaped and dodged. He was identical to Owen, but, maybe because the weight of responsibility on him had been less, far merrier.

Charles had to smile as he looked at his wife. She would hate the reasons behind the expression, but there it was; it was the prerogative of spouses to hate each other sometimes. The woman who had been Medusa Bulstrode when he married her still had laugh lines around her mouth and worry lines around her eyes, though right now her heavy brown hair was far more tangled than it had been on their wedding day. She darted forward, swinging her skillet at her son's knees, and, as Michael dodged to block her, caught him a smart rap on the shoulder.

"Owww, Mum!" Michael complained, even as his arm went numb and he dropped his weapon.

Medusa danced in triumph, turning to say something sharp to him—doubtless about how he should respect his mother more—and then caught sight of Charles and Owen. In an instant, she'd handed her

own skillet to an elf and advanced to kiss Charles on the cheek, trying hard to calm the flush on her face into something more demure. "Greetings, dear," she said. "I trust the meeting went well?"

Just this once, Charles didn't want her to put on the mask. He held her shoulders, kissed her until he heard his sons make gagging noises, and then shooed them away. Medusa watched him questioningly, the more so when he led her out of the kitchens. "The cake—" she started.

"Was going to burn anyway," Charles finished.

She crossed her arms and huffed at him.

Charles embraced her in silence, letting his head rest on her shoulder. Medusa went quite still for a moment, then stroked his hair. This was why they had the kind of marriage they did, Charles thought, relaxing from more than the touch. They complemented each other, and they did it very well. The moment he arrived home agitated, Medusa would know, and seek to calm him. And when her false worry gave way to the real thing, then he took her in his arms and rocked her until she could stand on her own.

"More real than you expected?" Medusa whispered, standing on her toes so she could speak directly into his ear.

And that was it, that was exactly it, though Charles hadn't known it until she said the words. "Yes," he said, his arms tightening fiercely around her. "Yes, it was."

Medusa didn't question him again, but stood and let him hold her, while Charles's mind sped intensely over everything he'd seen for the last few hours.

Oh, he'd agreed to the alliance with Narcissa Malfoy thinking he knew what it meant. He had no reason to be fond of the Dark Lord. He'd spent all the Rosier-Henlin money donated to his cause in the last war with a reckless lack of care, and he'd killed one of Charles's own nephews in a raid at the height of his power, when he regularly underestimated the readiness of the Aurors. Dumbledore wasn't

attractive either, though, and any third way would have sounded like bell music to his ears.

And then had come the stories about Harry Potter being abused. Charles had blinked, but still thought he knew what it meant—that the alliance would just be a little harder, that was all, and the adults would guide the boy, use him more as a figurehead than anything else.

And then, today, he'd actually met Potter.

Such strength and such fragility, Charles thought, as Medusa guided him to a chair and sat him down in it, beginning to massage his shoulders. He'd seen the pallor and the dark circles beneath the boy's eyes, both indicating a lack of rest. He'd seen, in many ways, the fourteen-year-old wizard he'd expected. And Potter had made mistakes that he must not have known he was making, constant small missteps that would have been impossible if he knew more about the families and the backgrounds of his allies. He did need guidance and advice.

But the magic.

Charles had been near Albus Dumbledore only a few times—though one of those times had convinced him not to send Owen and Michael to Hogwarts—and the Dark Lord only once. He had forgotten, or perhaps just never known, the sheer intoxicating effect that power had when it was pouring off a Lord-level wizard, rotating around him in a visible aura. Charles's family saw such power as lightning, and he'd kept quiet throughout most of the meeting, not wanting to embarrass himself by revealing his distraction. Harry Potter in the midst of a lightning storm took some getting used to.

And he was an Occlumens! That, Narcissa Malfoy had not reported; Charles wondered if she had known. He hadn't followed up on Charles's admittedly feeble Legilimency. Perhaps he was too tired.

Perhaps he had no need to. The phoenix on his shoulder would attest to that, and so would the confident way he laid out his plans.

And so Charles was left following an ally who could apparently fall any moment, but promised utter glory and rewards if he succeeded.

This is so real, he thought, as he laid his head on his wife's shoulder again. So very real, and I wonder more than ever now what the Potters were thinking, to turn such power against them.

Mortimer Belville settled his cloak carefully around his shoulders before he strode into Belville Hall. Portraits of his ancestors, and not the living things, sat around the room, but they would like to see him looking his best.

Murmurs of appreciation followed him as he made his way through the room, and Mortimer inclined his head, looking neither to the right nor the left. It didn't do to take too much notice of portraits; it only encouraged them. For the matter, he could say the same thing about his parents and grandparents.

He found several letters from said distinguished oldsters waiting on the table when he arrived in his private study, accompanied by flustered owls. Mortimer rolled his eyes and levitated treats to them from a distance. He didn't want to chance getting feathers and pellets on his clothes.

He sipped his wine as he read through the letters at a leisurely pace. They were all the usual bothersome notes, offering to introduce him to this young witch or that slightly older wizard. A blood child or a magical heir, that was what the family wanted. Preferably several of them, and they wanted them right now.

Mortimer snorted and let his head fall against the back of his chair, flexing his fingers around the wineglass. Why did none of them ever realize that he wasn't interested, not yet? Of course he had every intention of doing his duty by Belville when it was time. But he was only thirty-five, and a pureblood wizard. He had decades left to live, unless he did something stupid first.

And the one thing I am not is stupid.

Lazily, he levitated the history of Merlin he'd been reading last night over to himself and scanned the pages, smiling as many of the names on them rang bells of recognition in his memory. Most wizards would not even know who one of these people were, let alone twenty. Not even most of his fellow Ravenclaws in Hogwarts would have known. Mortimer delicately licked his finger and turned the page, enjoying the smell of ink and wine and silence.

All of them think they can control me. Even Potter does. I saw that from the way he looked at me. He thinks me small, of no account, just a tool for his ends. Ha, I say, and ha again.

I control them, not the other way around. Intelligence always wins, and I am more intelligent than anyone there.

Cradled by his confidence in how bloody brilliant he was, Mortimer settled in for a long afternoon of reading.

Too cold here. Too lifeless. Too without the noise and the light and the warmth that Edward Burke was already coming to think of as a necessary component of his life, ever since little Narcissa Malfoy had shown up at his door with just the right combination of admiration and judicious flattery to get him to join this alliance she was setting up.

Edward liked being flattered, of course he did, but that didn't mean he was just going to give in to it. One didn't do that, especially someone who was a son of the illustrious Burke line and a rightful heir, if he'd only chosen to press the claim, of the Black family.

He had to be courted. He had to be won. And someone with ties to Minister Scrimgeour, of all people—wasn't that a blasted surprise, and just like a young wizard, all power and no sense?—would have to work harder than usual to win his support.

Edward stamped his foot and snapped his fingers irritably, so that the house elves would get into his bedroom and light the damned fire already. Honestly, sometimes he felt as though the disrespect which infested the outside world and made it an uncomfortable place for him to live had infested his own home. There was no other explanation as to why Tid couldn't have the fire in his bedroom already lit when he returned from an important meeting like this one.

He took his favorite chair, affecting to take no notice of Tid as the elf crept in and performed his duties. In reality, of course, he watched every movement, and noticed how long it took, and compared it to the quicker motions of the Malfoy house elves. More observant than most people thought him, that was Edward Burke all over.

And more able to look out for his own advantage, too.

Oh, he knew why Narcissa had approached him. She wanted the pressure of his family name, of one more Dark wizard making the alliance look attractive to other Dark wizards. He was a tool. He knew it.

Edward didn't mind. Or, well, he minded, but he knew better than to show he minded. He could wait. Slytherins were patient. Burkes were patient. Blacks were—well, not patient, but they could be ingenious.

He noticed everything. He'd noticed the way that Narcissa had seated him by the halfblood Pemberley girl, a subtle insult, when she knew that he couldn't abide Muggles or those polluted by their dirty blood. He'd noticed the way that most of the wizards around the table affected not to look at him. Intimidated, they were, by the thought of matching wits or stares with a scion of the Black and Burke lines.

He'd noticed when Potter didn't dare to make him stand up and bow like the others. He had the advantage there, no doubt about it.

And why shouldn't he? The Potter boy was halfblood, and everyone who was anyone knew that dirty blood clouded and dirtied the thoughts as much as it did one's ability to perform magic. Edward listened, and oh, Edward knew. He had heard the whispers. Unnatural, they said about his magic, and Edward was inclined to agree. No son of a Mudblood had any business having that much magic.

So, old Edward listened, and old Edward noticed, and old Edward knew. The Potter boy wasn't really anybody. He was a convenient puppet that the Malfoys had found. Most likely Lucius, the sly old crow. And they were manipulating him with just the right degree of

incredulity. A fourteen-year-old wizard with Lord-level power, who put on a light show at Walpurgis? It sounded just ridiculous enough to be true. Merlin knew there were Dark wizards out there who would snatch at any chance that would get them clear of either Light wizards or Voldemort's power.

But such traps couldn't catch a wizard of Edward Burke's strength or discernment. He would watch a little longer, but he was already sure where his advantage lay with this alliance, and unless he uncovered something stunning about Potter, then he wouldn't hesitate to employ it.

A vates is a wizard poised between Dark and Light, one committed to freedom and unbinding. A vates is in an unusual position, because, while he must have enough power to declare himself a Lord, he must never do so. A Lord is committed to leadership, to ruling and governance, and may, of course, use compulsion for the ends of either the Dark or the Light. A vates must be committed to leadership only if it is the best course for those he would lead, and must never use compulsion at all. There has never been a vates in history who freed more than a few magical species, because of the difficulty of staying on this path...

Thomas Rhangnara pushed the book gently away from him, aware that excitement was making his hands, and thus the pages, vibrate. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, hooking his hands together behind his head, while fireworks burst in his mind.

That would be something, wouldn't it? Potter apparently embodies a philosophical problem come to life. I'm not sure I believe that he can tread this path, because no one ever has, but to see him tread it...

Thomas shot to his feet and paced around the library. At times like this, when he was so excited, he just couldn't sit still. He had been like this in the last days before he declared for Dark, too, because then the arguments were all starting to make sense, and rushing together in his head towards some magnificent conclusion. He almost felt the same way now, though of course it was different; now, he hadn't studied for several years to get to this same place.

But there was a wizard walking around in the world who might be a vates.

How exciting was that?

Thomas knew he couldn't stay in the library any longer. He had to share this with somebody. He burst out of the library, nearly knocking down his eldest daughter, Melissa, who had just emerged from her bedroom. She steadied herself with a little cry, but her face softened the moment she looked up at him. Thomas smiled back at her. His children all knew his expression when he'd just learned something new, and all of them were perfectly willing to listen to him, too. Thomas often felt blessed, but never more so than when Robert, or Melissa, or Rose, or Charis, or Albert, all showed that his thoughts were important to them.

"What is it, Daddy?" Melissa hooked her arm in his and turned him back towards the library.

Thomas began explaining what a vates was to her, and how Potter might become one. Melissa listened and made admiring noises until Priscilla opened the door to announce that she was back from the Ministry, and why hadn't Thomas made dinner yet?

But when she found him on his favorite chair, with Melissa on the stool at his feet, Priscilla simply rolled her eyes and kissed him on the brow and said, "Meeting go well, dear?"

Thomas leaned back and grinned happily at his Auror wife. "Very."

Priscilla kissed him again. "Good. Now, perhaps we can get something to eat? I'm very hungry. We chased a bastard today who went over five roofs in a row before we finally caught him."

Thomas stood up and started to walk out of the library, but Melissa and Priscilla both made him, as always, leave the books where they were, instead of bringing them to the dinner table. Thomas had to be content with chattering to his wife and daughter—and the other

children, who soon joined them—about why he felt the meeting had gone so well.

This is just so interesting. If nothing else, I am going to owe Potter for making my life so interesting.

Ignifer Apollonis straightened her back and held absolutely still. Her mother was the one who had firecalled her. That meant Artemis Apollonis could well and good state her business, or she could go away.

Her mother's face, highlighted in the flames, was the mirror image of her own, save that Ignifer was keeping her face inflexible, and Artemis was frowning. And she was starting the same speech she made every day, the one that made Ignifer grind her teeth. But it would have been cowardly to refuse to allow her mother to firecall her, and Ignifer was not a coward.

"All you have to do is kneel before your father and say you're sorry, that you apologize," said Artemis. "That's all, Ignifer. Sweet Minerva, I would not have accounted for anyone being so stubborn, let alone a sweet girl raised to honor and revere the Light and her parents."

It was word-for-word what she had said yesterday, and the day before, and the week before that, and so on and back for fifteen years. Ignifer gave the same answer she'd given yesterday, and the day before that, and the week before that, and so on and back for fifteen years. "The Dark, and not the Light, saved my life." She could feel, as if it were still present, the immense, fallen stone block pressing down on her chest, crushing the breath and the feeling and the life out of her. She could feel herself reaching out desperately with all the magic she was trained to use, and accomplishing nothing. She could hear the wind as the wild Dark, called in desperation, came to her and levitated the remains of the house she'd been in when the Death Eaters struck off her. "I promised that I would serve it if it did. And you always taught me to keep my promises."

Artemis flinched, the same way she always did. "You will never have children until your father calls the sterility curse back, Ignifer. And you

know that he will only do that if you kneel before him and make submission and swear to return to the Light.”

“Then he won’t call it back,” said Ignifer. “And he won’t have grandchildren, either, nor any more magical heirs, since I am his. Goodbye, Mother.”

Neither courage nor politeness forbade her willing the flames out of existence, and thus ending the connection. Ignifer had been friends with fire since the earliest days of her childhood; it was how her accidental magic had manifested, and still the easiest weapon for her to fling in battle. She turned her back on the hearth now and paced over to sit in her favorite chair under the far wall, the one Artemis had to look at when she peered through the Floo. Ignifer had decorated it the way it was on purpose, of course.

The wall was painted black wood, hung with gleaming shards of obsidian and ebony and jet, deep green or deep purple leaves charmed to stay fresh, and black roses and belladonna and other plants used in brewing potions that had nothing but an evil purpose. Ignifer put her head back and took in the sight and scent of them until she felt slightly calmer.

Then she took up the sword that hung low on the wall—dark wooden hilt, shining blade made of Damascus steel—and passed through the door behind the chair. She felt a brief, dizzying moment of flight, and then she landed in another place entirely, a place with high mountains in the background and shimmering heat in the air, warmer than Great Britain would ever get. Ignifer shook her hair behind her shoulders with a slight smile. There were advantages to charming a door in her home to act as a Portkey.

A small, copper-colored dragon thrust its head around the boulder in front of the door, and bared its venomous fangs at her. Ignifer grinned and lifted the sword. The Peruvian Vipertooth slithered towards her, head up and neck swaying back and forth.

There was no better exercise, Ignifer thought as she spun around in a circle and thrust the sword hard against the scales, knowing it would

be deflected, than dueling for one's life with a dragon when one wanted to use the body and the mind to their utmost at the same time.

Circle. Duck. Roll as the fangs came stabbing down in the dirt behind her. The tail, watch the tail.

This Potter was intriguing, and the alliance did seem more interesting than Ignifer had assumed at first. She had no love for Voldemort, but then, she had no love for most of the Dark wizards her new Declaration had made her sister to, either. They watched her with distrust in their eyes, always. At least Narcissa had approached her with proper reverence for her classical education and her affinity with fire, both of which she admitted could be useful in making alliances and in giving battle.

Leap, duck, turn, now, circle now, and down, nearly stabbing it in the eye before the dragon jerked back with a pained squeal.

And if what the alliance seemed to promise her was the real thing—

A stunning blow as the tail caught her along the ribs, but she'd deserved that; she really hadn't been paying attention. Roll, drop to one knee, let the tail go overhead this time. It really was as easy as declining manus.

--then Ignifer could only welcome it. She had always known her place when she was of the Light, known who she belonged to and who her enemies were and who she could depend on. And since turning to the Dark, she'd been floundering, keeping her feet mostly by refusing to bend or break.

A second dragon coming now. Call fire, and her hands were flaring with it, and the dragons were hesitating to approach.

If she had siblings, friends, allies, even a Lord whom she would serve as if he were a Lord despite the title he refused, then she could belong again. She could stop being so lonely, stop encasing herself in rock that she knew would make her bleed to death in the end.

And there came a Dragon Keeper, waving his arms furiously at her. None of them had a sense of humor about dueling dragons for exercise, even though she never killed one of them. Time to go.

Ignifer pushed her hair out of her eyes as she landed back in her own house. She felt more relaxed, now, enough to let some of the impressions of Potter she'd formed without knowing it dance before her eyes.

He's encasing himself in rock, too, bleeding to death behind a mask of strength. Perhaps I can help him recover from that, as long as he's offering me a place at his side.

Honoriam Pemberley stood in her entrance hall, hidden behind an illusion, and watched her father's eagle-owl vainly scan the room for her. It had been a while since she got good enough to fool owls, but it was still a new enough trick to delight her.

Of course, a giggle escaped her lips at last, and the owl fluttered over and deposited the letter in front of her, flying away without waiting to be paid. Honoriam let that illusion fall, chucking all the while, and looked at the letter. She rolled her eyes when she recognized her mother's handwriting on the outside of it.

Her mother, Mary, was a Muggle, but she acted as proud as any pureblood wizard born to the bloodline, Honoriam thought, while she created a line of small faces all sticking their tongues out at the letter. Above all, she was insistent that her daughter have blood children. No adopted magical heirs would do. She wanted grandchildren who were actually Pemberley by birth. And she had persuaded her husband, Honoriam's father, to the same way of thinking.

Since Honoriam liked women, this was somewhat of a problem.

Honoriam knew what the letter would say. Honor of the family blah blah blah, blood children blah blah blah, not welcome home until you marry some nice young wizard blah blah blah. It wasn't worth opening it, not even for a laugh. Her mother was tiresomely regular.

Honorio cast the letter into the flames, and then, since she was there anyway, opened up the Floo Network and went to Tybalt's house. He came to her eagerly, almost before the house elf who received her could call him. He clasped her shoulders, gave her a ridiculously lascivious kiss on the cheek that his partner John always pretended to scowl and grumble at, and then stepped back and looked at her expectantly.

"How did the meeting with Harry go?" he asked.

"Oh, you call him Harry, now?" Honorio shook the soot from her cloak and hung it up on the rack near at hand, creating an illusion of another one around her shoulders. "Isn't he a bit young for you?"

Tybalt smacked her hand. "I'm very joined, thank you. I just want to know how he is."

"Bad," said Honorio simply, thinking of how the glamour that hid the boy's cut-off left hand had wavered even as she looked at it. "Like he's about to collapse. Did you know that he'd had his left hand cut off?"

Tybalt stared at her.

"I guess not," Honorio concluded.

"Sweet Merlin." Tybalt stepped back and sat down on one of the shallow divans near the fire, frowning broodingly. "And then the charges against his parents. He's not having a good month, I would guess."

"No, and it'll get worse before it gets better." Honorio sat down on the divan across from her friend. She had never forgotten, never would forget, that Tybalt had been the first to open his home to her after her own parents had thrown her out. She owed him the entire truth, even though she figured Potter probably wouldn't have wanted her to tell it. "And you know that I'm practiced at seeing through other kinds of illusions, too, not just the magical ones. He's on the edge of collapse, Tybalt. When he falls, it's going to be hard."

Tybalt frowned softly. "Do you still want to follow him?"

"Of course." Honoria snorted. "If nothing else, I got a letter from my mother warning me not to do it. That's reason enough to do so."

"It might be more serious than that, Honoria." Tybalt caught and held her eye. "Can you really tie yourself to someone who might, as you say, collapse in the midst of battle, and whom you can't joke or cajole out of doing that?"

"Of course," Honoria repeated. "I am committed to this, Tybalt. I signed my name. And having a reputation for breaking my word would keep me out of all the best parties."

Tybalt sighed and put his head in his hands. "I never know whether you're being serious or not."

"I'm both at once." Honoria stood and kissed his cheek. "Now, I've really got to go. I'm practicing my Animagus transformation."

Tybalt laughed at her. Most of her friends did, when she said that. They thought the idea of Honoria becoming an Animagus, achieving a transformation that lasted longer than her whim dictated, was a marvelous piece of fun.

Honoria smiled as she stepped into the flames again. She thought it was fun to watch them laugh. It was so much fun that she had no intention of telling them that she'd actually mastered the transformation two years ago. She made quite a fine sea-mew, if she did say so herself.

"Go to your room, Edith."

Edith ran away at once. She did not hesitate and question. Henrietta nodded as she made her way to the rune room. Edith knew what she had done wrong without prompting. She had shown hesitation and fear in front of Potter. She was mortified, as well she should be.

Henrietta arrived in the rune room, and shut its door carefully behind her. Her husband, Tertian Brown, would know better than to disturb

her if he came home and found her here. With the door closed, the patterns drawn on the walls came together and formed one shimmering circle of power, which Henrietta could use to work some of her strongest magic.

She began with whips of light, calling them forth from her hands with nonverbal incantations and slicing through several feet of cloth, then of wood, then of stone, which the room provided when she asked for them. With each slice, her confidence returned, and the slight startlement she'd felt in Potter's presence slid away from her.

Oh, yes, the boy is powerful, she thought, as she began the Dark Arts curses that she always practiced to keep her hand in. They burst with far more force here than they would elsewhere, but Henrietta had hopes of at least doubling their strength outside the room. But what good is power without the will to use it?

She had sensed that weakness in Potter at once, with her usual talent for finding the one personality trait that would hamstring another witch or wizard. Potter was too soft-hearted. He had magic that made Henrietta's mouth water, but he believed too much in mercy, in kindness, in compassion, in leaving choices open to other people when he would do better to herd them along.

Even more devastating, at least for his own cause, he obviously expected the same mercy, kindness, compassion, and consideration from his allies.

Henrietta laughed aloud as she cast a curse that would have made part of the room's wall sway and buckle, if the runes hadn't held it up and filled in the stone between the patterns as fast as it disintegrated.

This was the kind of chance she'd been looking for for years. She would have done something about it earlier, but there hadn't been enough of a power vacuum in wizarding Britain for the last fourteen years. Albus Dumbledore had a lock on most wizards' devotion, and the Dark families were mostly scattered, bribing people in the Ministry for petty individual gains or clinging to their old alliances and pride and not looking beyond them.

Now came this tasty prize, an alliance organizing around someone who had only his magic to recommend him.

An abused child, a soft-hearted child, a child who knew nothing about the way the world worked.

Henrietta had only to gain control of him and of the alliance, and she would have the platform she needed to work her own will.

Exultant, excited, she spun and fired another curse at the far wall, then had to duck as it bounced back at her, reflected from a shield rune.

Oh, it would take some time, she knew that. She would need to understand his psychology better before she worked it so that it broke him. But he was close to shattering already, and the papers were full of clues to his past. Henrietta was confident that it wouldn't take her long to find something she could use.

She lifted her arms above her head and bowed, in homage to her own cleverness, then raised her head and smiled at her unseen prey.

Watch out, Potter. Henrietta Bulstrode is hunting you.

Chapter Six: Song of Battle

As the new allies began Flooing or Apparating home, Harry slipped gratefully out of the meeting room. No one seemed to notice his going—except Narcissa, but Adalrico was speaking to her, his voice quiet and urgent, and she couldn't get to Harry before he escaped. Harry realized the conversation was probably about him, but so long as he didn't have to hear it, then he was content.

He leaned against the wall outside the meeting room and shut his eyes. Fawkes crooned at him and groomed a bit of his hair, then paused and uttered a warble that Harry didn't figure out in time.

"Harry."

"Mrs. Bulstrode," said Harry, opening his eyes but keeping his gaze on the floor. He knew she was kneeling in front of him, and that her face would be full of concern, because puellaris witches were like that. He didn't have to look if he didn't want to, though. And he didn't want to. This was another time when he would just have to wait a few more minutes to relax. He would fight his way through the conversation with Elfrida, and then go upstairs and sleep. He was sure that he would do so deeply with Fawkes beside him.

"I wanted you to see Marian," said Elfrida, voice gentle. "You haven't seen her since the night she was born."

Harry felt a boneless relaxation drop into his shoulders. That was true, and if she had only come to talk about Marian, then he didn't have to fear any personal inquiries he couldn't deflect. He reassured himself that he'd been silly to panic. After all, the truth he'd learned years ago still held good: most people were more interested in talking about themselves or what related to themselves than they were in talking about him. He leaned forward obediently, and Elfrida drew back a fold of the blanket that had covered Marian's face.

Harry had thought she would be asleep, since she had been quiet throughout the meeting, but Marian was awake, moving her fists in small, complicated patterns above her head, to which she was giving the whole of her attention. Her hair was coming in dark, and was

plastered slightly to her head. Her eyes were still blue. Harry wondered if they would change color or not. He didn't know how long it was before that happened to babies.

"She's been very good for me so far," Elfrida murmured, smiling down at her with an expression so warm and tender that Harry felt strengthened just being near it. "She almost never cries, and when she does, then I know that she really needs something from me. I think going through what she did when she was just a few minutes old changed something in her." Elfrida lowered a hand and touched Marian's face with exquisite tenderness, then glanced back up at Harry. "I did say once that I wanted you near Marian while she was young, so that she could experience powerful magic and not be frightened of it. Do you think you could show her some of that now, Harry?"

Harry blinked. "Do you think she'll remember this later, Mrs. Bulstrode?"

Elfrida laughed softly. "No, Harry, but she would get used to it the same way that she gets used to warmth and learns to fear cold. It's not the specific memory that matters, but her growing accustomed to the sensation."

Harry nodded doubtfully. He supposed Elfrida was right, but he hadn't ever studied caring for children. It hadn't been something he needed to learn, with Connor the same age as he was.

He knelt down beside Elfrida, and then she complicated things by handing Marian to him. Awkwardly, Harry adjusted his arms around the baby, afraid that her head would flop in one direction and her body in another. He could too easily imagine her neck snapping or her head smashing if he dropped her.

"There," said Elfrida gently. "Just use one arm to support her head and one around her waist, and then—there. Good, Harry." Harry couldn't help soaking in the praise in spite of himself, and it was true that Marian's warmth felt soft and delicious against his chest. "Now, release your magic a bit."

Harry half-closed his eyes and let some of his barriers slip.

Rich magic flooded the hall, and lapped back on Harry and Marian. Marian made an inquiring little noise and waved her hands, but the noise wasn't distressed, so Harry went on pouring it. Marian's nose wrinkled up a moment later, and she sneezed.

Harry would have stopped, if Elfrida's laughter hadn't encouraged him. "She's a Bulstrode," she said. "And they smell powerful magic as thunderstorms. That's all. Go on, Harry." Her hand descended on his shoulder, as though to support him. Harry wondered why. The wall was doing a good job of holding him up.

He kept an eye on Marian's face as he went on exuding his magic, certain he should stop at any moment. But Marian only grew more and more alert and lively as the power rose around them. She giggled, and the movements of her hands seemed to become more coordinated. She laid her head on Harry's hand and blinked blue eyes up at him.

Elfrida rubbed gently at his shoulder, and then began to sing, so softly at first that Harry mistook the song for an audible manifestation of his magic. He kept his focus on Marian, at least until the actual words of the song claimed his attention.

The song was a mother's chant, the words of a witch watching over her child who would do anything to keep that child safe.

Harry calmed his instinctive flutter of panic by telling himself that she was singing for Marian, but that justification smashed when he turned his head and met her eyes. They were focused on him. Elfrida looked fiercer than he had ever seen her, and a glint of fang shone from her mouth. He remembered that puellaris witches transformed into lionesses when they defended their children.

Or children under their care.

She thinks of me as her child.

Harry stiffened, and then had to juggle Marian. He pulled his magic carefully back into his body. It was harder than he expected. He must have come closer to collapse than he thought. Elfrida watched him with a faint frown that grew more pronounced as he rebuilt his barriers.

“Harry, what is wrong?” she whispered.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry, and was horrified to hear his voice becoming jagged. He might have collapsed with some of his new allies still in the Manor. He gently pressed Marian back into Elfrida’s arms and turned his face to the side as he eased along the wall, ignoring Fawkes’s scolding croons. “This is wonderful. You’re wonderful. I just—I can’t. Not right now.”

“Harry—“

Harry did not quite run towards the stairs up to his room, but it was a near thing. Fawkes fluttered and clung until Harry hissed at him to go away. Then he closed his bedroom door behind him, locked it, and flung himself on the bed.

Relaxing was one thing. Sharing a tender moment with one of his allies was fine. Doing what he had promised was great. But he had felt himself peering over the rim of a collapse much greater than he had any room to make, down there.

I’m sorry, he whispered, uselessly, to people who couldn’t hear him. I’m sorry. But I know that I didn’t do a very good job of convincing my new allies, definite plans or not, and I need to keep up that mask of strength until I do. I’m sorry.

He pinched his nose until the tears in his eyes became the far less threatening tears of pain, and then went to bed. A gentle knock came at his door a few minutes after he did, but Harry ignored it, and after an understanding pause, Draco went away.

Harry dreamed.

This dream was unlike the others, though. In his visions, he had always been in a solid place, with walls or trees around him and the Dark Lord somewhere to the front or side. This time, he was drifting in a hazy mist, which only gradually parted and ebbed together to create images that made sense.

The strongest component of the dream was the mood, really. Harry could feel excitement around him like a living, breathing current of air. He was sure it was Voldemort's excitement, and while it made him shiver to be so bathed in it, he began to wonder if the Dark Lord was dreaming, and had caught Harry up in that dream. If so, then he should wake up, because he didn't think there was anything to be learned from seeing Voldemort's nightly ambitions. Harry already knew that he feared death and hated Muggles and desired domination of the wizarding world.

The dream snapped suddenly into focus, though, and Harry found himself very nearly in a vision. He glanced around, and saw the back of a house in front of him, with the full moon riding overhead. It looked like a dream of tonight, but did Voldemort have prophetic dreams? Harry started to lash his tail in frustration, and then realized he was human, and not lynx, in this dream.

He crouched down and pulled out his wand as an instinctive gesture of comfort. The nature of their connection had indeed altered. He wasn't sure what had done it, though perhaps it was due to the resurrection. And he had no idea whether he might be in danger here.

He scurried to the side, and watched the moon ducking in and out of the racing clouds above. Then the light struck through them, and while Harry had never seen the house from this angle, he no longer had any trouble in recognizing it, particularly given the shimmer of isolation wards around it.

The Burrow.

He's thinking of going after Connor.

Voldemort's exultation surged around him, and Harry sensed the dream breaking up through no will of his own. Voldemort was

probably waking with the thought of attacking his brother firmly in mind.

Harry jumped, frantically, his heart so busy in his throat it seemed ready to strangle him. He had to wake, and he had to get to the Burrow right away.

Harry sat bolt upright, gasping, and then winced as searing pain cut through his scar. At least it wasn't bleeding, he thought, as he rolled out of bed and landed heavily on the floor. And he had no need to get dressed, since he had fallen asleep hours ago wearing his clothes. He stretched one arm above his head, then the other, to relieve the aches that came from sleeping too long in the same position, and stood and headed for the door.

He opened it to find Draco there, and blinked at him for a moment before the dream bit him like a dragon. "Excuse me, Draco," he said, starting to edge past him.

Draco caught his left wrist just below the glamour, a usual gesture with him lately when he wanted to attract Harry's attention. "What's going on?" he asked, barely moving his lips. "I felt your panic all the way down the hall. And now you look as if you're going into danger again. What is it, Harry? You did promise me that you would tell me before you hurried off."

Harry wanted to scream. Unlike the visions, which happened simultaneously with his seeing them, he didn't know how long it would be before Voldemort landed at the Burrow. That only made him more determined to go, not less. But, on the other hand, Draco was physically stronger than he was right now, and Harry didn't want to hurt him with his magic.

He made up his mind. It wouldn't take long. "Voldemort was dreaming about attacking Connor," he whispered. "And now he's resolved on it, or it seemed like that before his dream broke up. So I have to go stop him."

"Of course you do," said Draco. "And the rest of us are going with you."

Harry blinked. "What?"

"Mrs. Parkinson stayed here this evening," Draco went on. "So did the Bulstrodes—all but Adalrico's cousin, of course. It won't take long to get them out of bed, and Mum and Father with them. If you are going to battle, Harry, then you'll have plenty of allies to fight beside you. Come on." He drew Harry down the hall before he could think of an objection.

Harry managed to set his feet as he reached the stairs. "But this isn't their fight—"

"I really am sick and tired of you saying things like that," said Draco casually, without looking at him. "The Parkinsons and the Bulstrodes are your formal family allies. And do you really think my parents would do less for you than they would?" He paused for a moment. "Well, maybe not Father, but what about Mum? She's risked her life for you many times, Harry."

Harry shook his head. "It's not that. But I haven't led a battle before. I don't know how to do it—"

"Bollocks," said Draco, ignoring the scandalized portrait they were passing at that moment. "Come on, Harry." He shoved Harry into the middle of the entrance hall, and paused to stare at him. "I'm going to get the others. Remember, Harry, one movement without me, and you'll find yourself under a Body-Bind or a sleeping potion. Just one." He turned and ran in the direction of doors Harry assumed led to the guest bedrooms.

Forced to wait, Harry closed his eyes and held a silent argument with himself. Would it really be better to stay here? He could still go into battle—

Like an idiot, yes, you could, said Regulus, with brutal force. You don't know if he's there yet, Harry.

But he could be! Harry wailed. And what if everyone else takes ages to get moving?

They were Death Eaters or fighters, Regulus said dryly. And Draco has plenty of experience hurrying after you by now. I doubt that they'll be long.

I can't risk their lives.

You're not. They are. That's the difference.

Harry was about to resume the debate when he heard claws tap on the floor in front of him. He blinked and looked up. A slender, pale werewolf he recognized as Hawthorn was trotting towards him, her slightly wrong muzzle and too-lengthy legs the main features that marked her out as different from an ordinary wolf. She came to a halt in front of him and fixed him with stern hazel eyes.

"Um," said Harry weakly. "Shouldn't you be out hunting?"

Hawthorn snarled at him, for a moment reminding him of the savage beast she would be without the Wolfsbane Potion. Then she extended her head and butted at him playfully. Harry wavered and nearly sat down, so weak was he. Hawthorn whined softly, turning her head to catch his eye again.

"I'm all right," Harry lied, looking away. "Just a bit of a shock, waking up the way I did."

"There she is."

Harry looked over his shoulder, and blinked. That had been fast. Draco was running back down the hall with Narcissa behind him in formal robes, obviously the first pair she'd snatched. Lucius was at his wife's shoulder, walking fast but not in an undignified manner. Elfrida and Adalrico were just flooding out of a room down the hall, holding their wands. Harry didn't think he'd ever seen an expression of such stony determination on anyone's face as Elfrida now wore.

Worried as he was, Harry started when he saw her coming to fight. "What about Millicent and Marian?" he demanded.

“Millicent is staying here,” said Elfrida calmly, swinging her cloak out of the way of her wand. “She’ll guard Marian for me, and the wards will do the rest. I trust her to protect her sister more than I trust her in battle.”

Harry ground down his teeth and said nothing about that. “Now can we go?” he demanded.

Draco caught his arm firmly. “Where are we going?”

“Ottery St. Catchpole,” Harry said. “The Burrow, the Weasleys’ house. My brother is staying there, and Voldemort is going to attack it.”

“Did Evan Rosier really send you a letter?” Adalrico demanded.

Harry sighed in agitation. “Does this really—“

“Yes, it does.” Adalrico dropped to a knee in front of him. “We are not about to risk our lives, Harry, or let you risk yours, without more proof than this.”

Harry swiped at his fringe, revealing his scar. “This gives me a connection to Voldemort,” he said, not having time to be amused as half his audience flinched at the name. Elfrida didn’t; he did note that. “I dream about what he’s dreaming, sometimes, and about his plans, and this time I dreamed about him getting eager and excited about the Burrow.”

Adalrico bowed his head and clenched his arm for a moment. “Thank you for trusting us enough to tell us, Harry.”

I wouldn’t have, but you made it impossible otherwise, Harry screamed in his mind, but kept his face calm. “Can we go?”

“Of course.”

They arranged themselves in a moment, with Lucius Side-Apparating Draco, Narcissa holding Harry’s wrist in a firm grip, and Adalrico and Elfrida standing on either side of Hawthorn.

Harry was desperately trying to calculate angles and how many Death Eaters were likely to be there as they vanished.

Harry and Narcissa landed on the slope behind the Burrow, in almost the same place from which Harry had seen the house in Voldemort's dream. He heard more distant cracks, and suspected the others were in slightly different places. He tugged, trying to get away from Narcissa and join them. There was no telling when the Death Eaters would arrive, or how many they would be when they finally did. That was one reason to prefer the visions: they gave him more exact information.

"Harry."

Harry paused and glanced reluctantly at Narcissa. From the tone she gave his name, this wasn't the first time she'd said it.

"You are not to risk your life unnecessarily," Narcissa whispered in his ear. "Do you understand me? I know that risk-taking is an inherent part of battle, but if I see you try to get in the way of a curse that you can't block, or worry more about defending someone else's life than your own, there will be consequences."

He had to shrink under the glare she gave him. It seemed that she was actually angry at him, the same way Draco was. Harry supposed he had treated them very thoughtlessly. He lowered his eyes and nodded.

"Good." Narcissa released him. "The others landed in front of the house. We should try to meet up with them."

Harry had just begun to move when he heard other sharp cracks begin. He tensed at once, and counted them. When they reached ten he snarled in silence and began to pace forward, his mind buzzing with battle spells.

Then an eleventh sounded, coming in behind them.

Harry spun, and the Blasting Curse on his lips just barely missed the dark figure who stood there, lifting his hands in mock surrender. In the light of the moon, Harry could make out Evan Rosier's face.

"Hello, Harry," he whispered. "Don't be so hasty. I've come to help you, and to tell you to be careful. My lord has no imagination. He thinks that someone who went after you once and failed should be allowed another chance. Fenrir Greyback is here." He paused dramatically. "But that is not the worst of it."

Narcissa had her wand trained steadily on Rosier, Harry saw. He ignored that. Right now, since Rosier was actually acting sane, Harry would treat his warnings as if they made sense. "What is the worst of it, then?"

He knew, even as another crack sounded, and his scar flooded with pain.

"My lord is here," Rosier finished softly, and then drew his wand and winked. "Should we go show him that he can't have things just the way he likes any more?"

He hurtled downhill. Harry felt Narcissa try to grab hold of him. But he had heard her warning, and he would heed it, and anyway, he was the only one on the battlefield with any chance of handling Voldemort. He slipped her grasp and followed Rosier, his magic lifting his feet just above the grass as he went.

He could feel Voldemort's magic, like a fanged, clawed beast just awakened, turning to face and find his. Harry let more of his own pour through his skin, this time rising around him in the old familiar shape of wings. This was not the gentle demonstration he had put on for Marian, but one far more battle-ready.

He came around the side of the house, and took in the beginning battle at a glance. He could make out Lucius's pale hair flying as he dueled two smaller Death Eaters, and two tumbling shapes that must be Hawthorn and Greyback, and Adalrico and Elfrida back-to-back in a ring of enemies, and Draco firing spells back at a heavysset Death Eater, probably Karkaroff, with a coolness that surprised Harry—

And in the center of it all, taking down the isolation wards around the Burrow, was Voldemort.

Harry made straight for him. He heard whooping behind him, and snarling, and yelping, and yelling, and the snap of spells, but he forced that all from his mind. He let the pain in his scar act as guide and beacon, rather than a distraction. Voldemort turned to face him with one upraised eyebrow, and his lipless mouth erupted into a low, hissing laugh.

Harry felt the grass stir to the side, but he didn't have time to evade the rush of the queen basilisk, which wrapped around his body and bore him to a rolling halt. Harry sucked in a desperate breath as he felt her try to crush his ribs, and heard both her and Voldemort laughing in Parseltongue.

A moment later, light flared overhead and Fawkes sang a battle-song, and the basilisk screamed. Harry suspected the phoenix was making for her eyes.

Harry Apparated, leaping from the basilisk's grasp into freedom not far from Voldemort. The stare of his red eyes was not much better than the stare from a basilisk, but at least it wouldn't kill him all by itself.

"Hello, Harry," said Voldemort, and the pain in Harry's scar cracked down like lightning strikes. "Come to surrender, at last, to your rightful master?"

"You wish," Harry whispered. His magic still rose around him like wings, and he felt the hatred rising with it, wrapping around his neck like a vine. This was the enemy he had trained to fight, and other people's attempts to direct his attention to other targets, his parents or Dumbledore, were only distractions. He had never fought wandless magic with wandless magic, other than by trying to drain his opponent's power, but he was beginning to think it was the only way he would meet Voldemort equally. Fighting a Dark Lord was not like fighting other wizards.

Voldemort laughed at him, as if he knew the way Harry's thoughts were tending, and the magic around him leaped eagerly forward.

Harry had no idea what way Voldemort imagined his power. He didn't have to know, he found. The pain that pierced him as that magic collided with his own was the pain of fang and claw, and he might as well imagine something that could fight back against that.

He chose the manifestation of a dragon, and actually saw the gleam of the dark wings for a moment as they wrapped around Voldemort's attacking power. That power shredded his own, of course, but that was all right; his dragon only had another layer of scales under that one. The dragon crowded close and clung with four legs, and Harry moved one hand in a clenching motion, imagining it whipping its head forward and crushing the throat of Voldemort's dragon. Harry heard a gasping breath from Voldemort, and rejoiced in the knowledge that he'd hurt the bastard.

Then Voldemort began to fight back.

Harry felt his magic expand outward, pushing, shoving him back, exploding the dragon that Harry tried to contain it with. Harry gathered in his magic as it swirled about, ignored the pain in his limbs, and stared at the earth behind Voldemort, not bothering to think of incantations this time.

Explode, he willed. Explode.

The earth leaped up in a fountain of grass and dirt, and Voldemort was knocked forward by the blast, all his attention too forcefully on Harry for him to concentrate on keeping his balance. Harry took as quick an advantage as he could, this time willing Voldemort's windpipe to crumple, his throat to crush.

Voldemort resisted, his dead-white skin achieving the hardness of iron, and then threw Harry off. He retreated a few steps from the Burrow, circling, pleased to note that he was drawing Voldemort with him.

Then they fell into the duel, and Harry discovered a level of battle he hadn't known existed. When two wizards were this powerful, not needing spells to contain their magic, what mattered was will, imagination, and foresight. It reminded Harry of those ancient contests of shapeshifters he'd heard of, with one becoming a sparrow and the other a hawk, one a stone and the other a beast with teeth that could crush a stone, one a mouse and another a cat. He had to try and anticipate what Voldemort was doing and counteract it, at the same moment as he had to imagine strategies that Voldemort himself would not be able to overcome.

And all on the fly.

Harry called wind that Voldemort swallowed that became a blast of force that Harry absorbed that became another tearing of earth that Voldemort resisted that flooded forth as a strike at his heart that Harry dodged that melted into a massive slap that Voldemort bore with and counteracted with an attempt to rip his ribs through his chest that Harry turned and batted home with enough strength to make Voldemort bend over and wheeze as his lungs labored that melded with breathing a cloud of poisonous gas into Harry's face that became—

At some point, Harry fell so thoroughly into the battle that he lost track of the other fighters, didn't think about drawing Voldemort away from the Burrow, and no longer knew anything except the fierce gladness that came from making another strike and turning yet another.

Draco dropped to one knee to dodge a severing curse, and then fired a tripping jinx at the Death Eater opposite him. The Death Eater fell over, and Draco scrambled up, shaking, mopping the sweat from his forehead and trying desperately to see where Harry was.

He whipped around just in time to see his father level his wand at one of the robed, masked figures and say, "Avada Kedavra."

Draco watched in detached wonder as the bolt of green light took another life from the world, cleanly and simply and quickly. One moment the Death Eater was alive, the next he was dead. Lucius was already turning to find another victim, his face unmarred by emotion.

Draco swallowed, and wondered if he had been ready to see that. One thing he was rapidly learning about himself, another point of difference from Harry, was that he would never go willingly into battle, or really be excited by it.

He backed up a step, and noticed a Death Eater with blonde hair flowing from behind her mask creeping towards his father's back.

Draco shouted, but Lucius was engaged in a crackling spell duel with his next intended victim, flipping from one incantation to the next, and didn't notice.

Draco ran. He didn't know what he could really do—his shout hadn't distracted the Death Eater, either, and his shock seemed to have wiped his mind clean of all useful spells—but he was determined to do something.

He fixed his eyes on the Death Eater and found himself pushing, reaching, in desperation, trying to use his strangely changed empathy to predict what she would do next.

There came a tearing, ripping sensation, and Draco briefly thought someone had hit him with a curse that managed to spill his intestines. Then he realized his perception was bouncing, as though his head had detached from his shoulders. His vision filled with hurtling dirt and grass, and he gasped, thinking he would have a mouthful of it any moment now.

Then he was inside the Death Eater's head.

Draco reeled, dizzy from the onslaught of so many different sensations: a taller body, breasts against his chest, a changed center of gravity, strange circulation of blood, an unfamiliar wand gripped in an unfamiliar hand, long hair flying around him, the sudden press of a cloth mask against his face and the restricted field of vision that meant. He had just enough presence of mind to try and steady himself, and he found the body obeying, stopping in its rush and shaking its head.

Draco didn't know how he was getting the Death Eater to do what he wanted, and he didn't really care. At the moment, he wanted to figure out some way out of this person and back to his own body.

And, of course, you want to stop her from attacking your father, Draco thought, and could have smacked himself.

He squeezed certain muscles, and her hand responded, coming up and pointing her wand directly at her own temple. Draco spoke the proper incantation for a Stunning Spell, whispered it through her brain, and heard her lips intone it. Then she dropped senseless as the spell struck home.

Draco found himself bouncing through darkness, but then he opened intimately familiar eyes, and felt his stomach heave in an intimately familiar way. He just managed to make sure he didn't vomit on himself.

So that's what my gift is, he thought dizzily, wiping at his mouth. I can possess people. How bloody useful is that?

Well, it could be very bloody useful, he answered himself, if he didn't kneel here on the battlefield and stare at nothing.

He lurched to his feet, staring around for more people to possess. Snarl, and snap, and grip, and dodge, and nothing was going as it should have been, the impertinent brat, the impudent boy, the inopportune brat.

He knew the boy was making him think in confused circles—he, Lord Voldemort!—and that enraged him further. He kept trying to break away from the contest he was engaged in, and still Harry Potter wouldn't let him. His magic, Lord Voldemort's stolen magic, boiled and surged around him, and even though he should have seen long since that he was the weaker of the two, he kept right on pressing forward, as if he were a Gryffindor and not a Slytherin, as if he had the right to challenge Lord Voldemort for this kind of power!

It would have been enough to drive a greater man mad, if there were any greater men.

But Lord Voldemort knew his opponent's mind, and he knew what was most precious to him, who out of the people on the battlefield he would die to protect. And he knew what Potter would assume when he saw Lord Voldemort point his wand at that person.

Yes, there he was, staggering up from his knees, staring around the battlefield, far from the other struggling Death Eaters at the moment and not paying any attention to the great Lord across the battlefield from him.

Perfect.

Harry had been aware for some time that the pace of his and Voldemort's interchange was slowing, but he thought that was due to his own weakness. He could think of no reason that Voldemort would want to back away from this contest. He didn't, himself. He wanted to continue until one of them was dead, and he didn't think that it would matter so very much if it was him. The magic flooded him, intoxicating, coaxing, pulling effort after effort from him.

Nothing else mattered, not food or drink or his brother or anything but defeating the Dark Lord.

Then Voldemort spun to the side, and Harry staggered, trying to recover his balance. He saw that Voldemort was not staring at him anymore. He looked up, wondering if someone else had arrived, and feeling a bit jealous that anyone else could draw the Dark Lord's attention even for a moment.

He saw Draco, climbing to his feet with eyes wide with wonder, and he saw Voldemort's wand lift and point, and yes, something did matter more than defeating the Dark Lord, and he sprang forward with a scream of rage and fury and love, shaping all his magic into an offensive strike, determined to take down Voldemort or at least force him to retreat before his curse could hit Draco—

Then he realized, as Voldemort turned to face him, and Harry was all open, all defenseless, that it had been a trap, that Voldemort had used his sacrificial instincts against him.

He had no time to retreat, no time to shield. He pushed and flung his offensive magic ahead, even as Voldemort said, "Cogo!"

It was the Compression Curse, a simple spell that Harry ordinarily would have had no trouble deflecting. He couldn't now, though. He'd left himself too open, put every impulse of his heart into the strike, and as his body began to be crushed together, his shoulders bending and breaking, he knew that he was going to die, squeezed into a ball just like every other victim of the curse.

He couldn't fight it, even as the extent of his stupidity flashed on him with the vividness of a storm, so he pressed ahead with his offensive strike. It was the only thing that remained to him now.

He saw the strike go home. Voldemort had prepared himself to shield against something else, Harry saw, some complicated attempt to turn him inside out or achieve another equally showy effect.

He hadn't prepared himself for pain, and especially not for emotional pain, for Harry's transfer of everything he was feeling right now directly into Voldemort's mind.

Harry felt his back bow at an impossible angle, but he got to see Voldemort squeezing his eyes shut and shaking his head. He knew his arms were curling into his chest, like the legs of a dying insect, but meanwhile Voldemort was shaking with accumulated pain and rage and fear and grief. Bones shattered throughout his body like explosions, but Voldemort was feeling explosions of his own, his mind struggling against the crushing onslaught of emotion and finding no escape.

He wailed aloud.

Then he Disapparated.

His magic went with him, and the Compression Curse eased. Harry slumped to the ground, his voice a mixture of groan and pant and scream. He heard the Death Eaters vanishing as well, and spared a moment to wonder if Evan Rosier was among them, or if he had fallen by the wand of one of his old comrades or Harry's allies.

But most of his mind, oddly, was utterly clear—probably because he had pushed so much emotion at Voldemort—and taken up with the idea that the ending of the Compression Curse was good fortune that he did not deserve. He had done nothing to win this battle, and had done something that might well have lost it for his allies.

He had rushed in without looking. He had acted as a sacrifice again, and this time it could have been the end of him, and the end of the means of defeating Voldemort as well, unless the prophecy chose Connor and one other person.

He had been a fool, and the cracks running all through him had broken wide open at the worst possible time. The mere revelation of what he was feeling had been enough to drive Voldemort away.

He stared along the ruin of his life, and felt iron determination rise in him, as if he had a new, steel skeleton behind his shattered shoulder blades and hips. Those bones hurt less than the revelation of his idiocy.

“Integritas!”

Harry gasped aloud, then screamed, as the Whole Healing spell, a dangerous incantation about two steps away from Dark Arts, ran over him in a flash of white heat. He could feel the damn thing pulling his shattered bones into place, shoving and tugging at his shoulders until they unbowed, drawing ruthlessly on his magic to put things back together and make them as they should be. It only worked on bodily health, of course, so the mental shards lay just where they had fallen, but after a few moments of incandescent pain that rivaled the agony when he had lost his hand, Harry was physically healed.

He rolled slowly over, and stared up at a grinning Evan Rosier.

“I couldn’t let you die,” he said. “You make life too interesting. But I couldn’t heal you nicely, either. I do have a reputation to maintain, you know.”

He vanished.

Harry closed his eyes. He could hear running footsteps, and knew his allies would be there in a few moments. He knew that he could cuddle into their arms, and accept what they had to offer. They would be more than he deserved, too.

And that means that you cannot go to them yet, said the voice of the new revelation rising in his mind.

He had acted like a fool. He must not act like that anymore.

On the other hand, if he went back with his allies now, and especially to Draco, Harry knew it would not be enough. Finally, finally, he was seeing and predicting his own reactions as thoroughly as he had seen and predicted theirs, and he knew that he wouldn’t let himself collapse completely. His pride would interfere again, and his desire not to be seen as weak, and he wouldn’t fall far enough.

It had to be a complete fall, and a complete rebuilding.

And he would have to do it himself. Other people had spent enough time healing him: Draco, Narcissa, Fawkes, Regulus, the unicorns, the Maze. He would do this alone. He thought now, as the iron skeleton of resolve grew throughout him, that he could do it, so long as there was no one around to see his tears and wrap him in warm arms and make him feel as if he had to defend himself and stop anyone from seeing the extent of the damage.

He was, he thought, at last ready to face himself, in the company of himself.

And for that he needed a private place, and he knew the perfect one.

You can't go there, Harry! Regulus was screaming in his head. You can't! It's too dangerous! I know that you don't do anything by halves, but this is too much!

Regulus, Harry said gently, I love you very dearly, and you've often been right, but this time, you're wrong. Go away.

He firmed his Occlumency shields and pushed Regulus out of his mind. Then he curled up on himself, savoring the remnants of pain.

He was going to face his demons, wasn't he? Then he might as well go to the place where most of them dwelt, and, indeed, not do anything by halves. He would drag himself through an interrogation as ruthless as that he would have put a captured Death Eater through.

He vanished even as he felt someone drop to his knees beside him, Apparating to a place where none of them could have followed, thanks to the isolation wards, even if they knew where it was.

Home.

Godric's Hollow.

Chapter Seven: Breakdown

Harry opened his eyes to find himself lying on grass that had once been intimately familiar to him, with the radiant full moon shining down in broken shards from overhead where its light passed through the isolation wards. He let out a sharp little breath. He had wondered if the wards would be intact, but he had imagined they would be. Lily had lived here by herself for more than a year, with only Dumbledore's house elves to tend her. Dumbledore would have wanted to be sure that she was well-protected, and the isolation wards that had stood around the house for fourteen years were stronger than anything he could have woven in just a few months.

Harry pulled himself slowly to his feet, blinking and staggering as his newly-healed bones protested, and then reached out and touched the holes in the wards. There were a few, mostly only large enough for owls. He repaired them, and then raised a thick ward of his own, twining together Shield Charms until a chain of Protego ran along behind the isolation wards, forming a dome, as they did.

He paused to study his work when he was done, and then nodded, once. The wards around the house were keyed to James, to Connor, to Remus, to Lily, to Dumbledore, and perhaps also to Peter, though Harry was fairly sure his father had changed that after Peter's intrusion in the summer before their third year at Hogwarts. That meant that they might be able to follow him here, particularly if Regulus managed to pass information through one of the former Death Eaters to Connor—

But even if they followed him here, they couldn't get in. The Shield Charms were keyed only to him, and would hold firm.

Harry turned towards the house, lying innocently in the moonlight, only to pause as he felt a tug of warmth in his mind. He shook his head in irritation, and raised his Occlumency walls even higher than he had before. Fawkes was trying to reach him. If Harry sealed the bond off like a tunnel, however, then the phoenix couldn't find him, and couldn't appear at his side. He had been in Godric's Hollow before, of course, but that had been with only the weaker wards in

place and Harry welcoming him. Harry was fairly confident he could keep Fawkes out even as he would keep out Regulus.

This was something he had to do alone.

He reached the door of the house and opened it. It swung easily under his hand, not needing even an unlocking charm. Of course, Harry thought, Lily hadn't had the need to fear anyone intruding while the isolation wards stood, and she had expected to return with him this summer. No need to lock it all up tight when she believed that she'd come back with him from Hogwarts just a few minutes after leaving.

And now she's gone.

But not forever, Harry told himself, and that was the reason he was here at all. He stepped into the entrance room and flicked his hand. The lamps in the room lit with a blast of brilliance, sending light flooding across books and furniture and carpeting he hadn't seen in a year and a half.

Harry bit his lip as he studied them. He wondered if the best place to do what he intended would really be here. The room held memories, of course, but he didn't think it was enough. His training had taken place here, but also all around the house, and the most traumatic single event he could remember occurring here was Remus's finding out he had been abused.

His fingers flexed spasmodically as he thought about that.

You can say the word. You can think it.

It didn't help that he didn't really believe it yet, of course.

Never mind. That would cease to matter in a moment.

Harry shook his head and moved on into the kitchen. It was dusty from several days of neglect; the house elves must have left to go back to Hogwarts when they realized there was no longer any human here to care for. Harry could feel his breath rushing faster and faster,

his spine stiffening, his hand clenching at his side. He didn't realize it was clenched until he tried to extend it to touch the table and found his fingers resisted moving, however.

This was the place where he had seen his mother for what he believed would be the last time, the day she had tried to renew the phoenix web on him.

This will do.

Harry forced his hand to open, and then seated himself on the floor, a careful distance from both table and cupboards. He didn't want to ram his head into anything, in case he made uncontrolled physical movements. He didn't want to fall, either. He half-closed his eyes and breathed for long moments in silence.

Carefully, he stripped away his consciousness of anything outside Godric's Hollow. The emotions he felt about his allies and Draco, Snape and Scrimgeour, his parents and Dumbledore, slid into Occlumency pools and left him alone. He could feel only his breathing, and the slinking of the truths beneath the surface of his mind.

Harry thought of the way he knew his own mind looked: a living thing, half-forest and half-tame, rustling with green leaves. Throughout it lay the Occlumency pools, and under them lay the bridges of his magic that he had established at the end of his second year, when he was trying furiously to contain it. A neat structure, he thought, and undergirded by training he hadn't ever tried to change. Training that ran deeper than the phoenix web, training that had made him into the person he was but the quality of which he hadn't paused to consider.

How could he have considered it, though? He had been told, when he received it, that it was infallibly right and good.

Well, now he knew better. And now, he could summon the cool, sleek resolve that had arisen in him when he pushed his emotions into Voldemort's mind, and had seen himself lying helpless on the ground.

He had sometimes been merciless to his enemies in the past, and certainly with people he had thought behaved stupidly.

He could be merciless with himself.

Couldn't he?

Yes. I can do that.

Harry took one final deep breath. Even the means to keep himself focused and concentrated on the task at hand would end up as the means of delaying it if he let them become so. He made himself promise that, when he let out this breath, he would begin the change, and then he let it out.

And he turned his own magic on his own mind.

He imagined his Legilimency as a dragon, withering, blasting flame-breath taking out the forest, crisping and drying the leaves, collapsing the half-woven hedges, tearing into the substance of his thoughts. He heard silent screaming, and knew it came from him, that it might even be emerging from his throat as audible sound. He pushed forward, even when his head began to burn with dull pain, willing himself to ignore it. He dug down and down, setting the heart of his memories and sanity carefully in the Occlumency pools, but burning everything else.

He imagined the leaves parting, revealing the old instincts and training at the bottom of them. He saw webs and bridges and wounds, old scarred things that had been made by carelessness or design and then allowed to recover as they would. He tore them open, and more pain raged around the inside of his head. Harry dove deeper, dragging his resolve along with him.

Pain.

Memories soared past him, images of himself as a child, of his parents, of Connor, of Draco, of Voldemort. One moment he was in the graveyard, the next facing Lucius Malfoy in his study, the next a child casting pain curses on himself so that he could learn to resist torture. He accepted the wild chaos and dug deeper, ravaging the things that made him who he was. Everything most essential, the

things he absolutely had to have to recover, was stored in the Occlumency pools. Everything else could be destroyed.

Somewhere along the way, he lost the consciousness of his name, though he knew he could recover it if necessary. That was in the Occlumency pools, too, or in the memories that stormed around him. He would only have to wait, and one of them would fly to him and stick itself to his face and tell him what he needed to know.

He landed at last near the bottom. His head pounded with pain. He knew that he had torn most of the webs that had confined him, though at the moment it was hard to remember why he had wanted to tear them. He lay back, panting, and then reached out and cracked open the first Occlumency pool, not trying to choose one in particular—he no longer remembered which was which—and waited to see what would emerge.

What emerged was an image of his brother. Connor, that was his name, and they were examining fairies at the bottom of the garden. After a short struggle, he remembered that their home was called Godric's Hollow. He didn't know his own name, not yet. That was not part of the scene. It was only a small thing beside the overwhelming consciousness of his brother. He smiled, and listened to Connor make up stories about the fairies, and studied the web of love that bound them.

That was part of what made him who he was, then.

And he had made mistakes because of it, savage mistakes. He had thought, for example, that nothing mattered more than Connor, or rather that Connor mattered more than everyone else. And that was a mistake because, if everyone really did deserve the same chances, then Connor deserved the chances that other people had—but not more. The people who had taught him to love Connor, whom he didn't know, yet, had twisted that, and taught him that Connor did deserve more.

Why?

He blinked. He found it odd, but freeing, that he did not know why. It had something to do with the heart-shaped scar on his brother's forehead, though. He leaned forward, and peered at that attentively. The remembered him smiled. But there was nothing about the scar that particularly drew the attention, he thought. Hm. Perhaps he should reach into the Occlumency pools, again.

He did, and stamped down on the messy emotions that wanted to emerge. There would be time for them later.

Ah. The scar came from surviving a curse and killing a monster—but his brother had been only a baby when that happened. And Connor had not been the one who had survived the curse and killed the monster. That had been the remembered him. Himself, he supposed. He thought that was where the lightning bolt scar on his forehead had come from. But no one particularly revered him for that, and why should they? He had not been the one who had chosen to face the monster.

More rummaging. More peering into the Occlumency pool.

Oh. Oh. Other people had made the decision for him. His parents, of course, and another older man whose name he didn't wish to remember yet. Well, that made more sense. Parents should make the decisions for their children. And if they knew that one of their children could kill the monster, then—

They hadn't known.

He paused as that realization struck him, and considered it a moment. Then he pulled up a memory, seen as from a distance, of the night the monster had come to Godric's Hollow, and what had happened. He watched it in silence, as if seeing it for the first time, conscious that he wasn't, but allowing new emotions to flood across his mind.

They had just left him and his brother to face the monster alone. They had not known that one of them could defeat him, not for certain. They had only hoped.

That—that is hideous.

He was aware, distantly, that his indignation was more general than specific. He would have been upset about any parents who left their children to a monster without absolute trust in the defenses that guarded them. He had a sense, dimly, that it had been harder for him to be upset about himself being the baby in the cradle who had lain helpless as the monster swooped down.

Not so helpless.

But that had been an accident, a chance, a coincidence. It might have been predicted, but no one had known which way it was going to happen. He might easily have died, and the monster might have been destroyed by his brother. Or maybe something else would have happened that resulted in Connor dying. So the excuse of the good outcome couldn't be used to justify their leaving Connor and him alone. They had not known, their parents and this man named Albus Dumbledore.

He seized that insight and examined it for a moment. He had the feeling that it was important, though he did not know how. He cracked open yet another Occlumency pool, and waited to see what would emerge.

A torrent of emotions answered him, and as they flowed out, the memories they belonged to came and attacked him. Harry, Harry, that was his name, and he was fighting, gasping, struggling to stay on his feet and keep his balance in the midst of the current, remembering the resolve that had driven him here, knowing again who he was and what his training had been—

But he had hold of the insight, too, and it did not slip away. He slammed the insight into the memories flooding past him, and then he understood.

He had said once that his training didn't matter, because he had survived it. So it did not matter that some evil things had been done to him in the name of love, in the name of a twisted greater good, that he was a sacrifice. He had survived, and he accomplished many

good things with the end result of that training. Why were Snape and the others so upset about it?

Well. Now he knew.

Harry could feel himself flinching from that insight, trying to fight it, marshalling all the old arguments. He raised steel cages of pure will and magic, cages that kept him from running. Wherever he turned, he saw only himself, reflected, and came to know and understand his part, because he had no choice.

They were upset for the same reason that he was upset about leaving children alone and helpless before a danger. Parents owed more care to their children than that. It did not matter that he was Harry, or that there was a prophecy involved, or that he had been taught to be a sacrifice. Other people still saw him as a child whose parents had not taken care of him. They saw him as a victim—

He really did revolt then, trying to knock himself unconscious rather than endure what was coming, but that merciless resolve gripped him and dragged him back. By Merlin, he would live through this. They were words, true words, and he would hear them.

He pulled himself through shattered glass, and he spoke them.

“They see me as a victim of child abuse because, to them, child abuse is a child’s parents treating him with something other than proper love and care. And that’s what my parents did.”

Harry opened his eyes, and became aware that he was breathing harshly all the while. Blood ran from his lips when he licked them; he had bitten almost straight through the lower one. He could not care. Revelation rang in his head like a crystal bell, and overrode the dull pain from his destroyed mind.

So that is what they see. That is what they know, or think they know. It is no wonder that they think me a victim. They would see any child in that situation as a victim. It is not that I’m me, particularly, that makes them think I can’t bear this. They would think the same thing of Connor if he had been trained to be a sacrifice for me. They would

think the same thing of Draco. They would think the same thing of Millicent.

Wonder and relief flooded his heart. So it really was simple. It really was understandable. It really made sense, when he was able to consider himself the same as everyone else, or at least as other children in the same situation, and not as unique.

Knowing that the world had not gone mad, that he could share everyone else's perspective if he really tried, was a great comfort.

Harry cocked his head. "So what would I expect Connor, or Draco, or Millicent, to feel, in the same situation?" he whispered.

Anger. Regret. Fear. Terror. They certainly wouldn't want to testify to save Lily's freedom, or to exonerate Dumbledore.

That is what everyone else is expecting me to feel.

Well, no wonder they're so upset when I don't appear to feel it!

Harry hooked his hand behind his head and lay back, staring at the ceiling. He could feel memories of the phoenix web and Lily pressing on him, if he really cared to look for them, but at the moment he was occupied in considering something else.

And why don't I appear to feel it?

Harry frowned, half-closing his eyes. He supposed that this was where his answer would differ from other people's, again. They would say it was his training. Any child should be as outraged and fearful as they were imagining.

But all those expected emotions only made part of his response. He did, still, feel the pity and the forgiveness that had made him shrink from the thought of charging even Dumbledore, the one he cared for least among the three, with child abuse. Their lives would be ruined.

"They've ruined my life," he murmured, then paused. The words felt false. He understood, now, why other people would expect him to

believe them. He could adopt that perspective by flicking his mind slightly to the side. Of course they had ruined his life by driving him into pain and uneasiness, by making him flinch with guilt whenever he wasn't doing something to serve Connor, by putting the phoenix web on him.

But a softer voice answered back to that: So what?

Harry examined the voice thoughtfully. Could he be sure that it was his, and not the voice of the training they had put him through, the voice—say it, Harry, they are only words, and words are easy—of an abused child?

Well. That was a stupid thought to have, really. If he was an abused child, then the voice of an abused child would be his own voice. So he couldn't say that it wasn't him talking.

The way he thought of it, he realized, lying back in the kitchen where he'd spent years learning his lessons and taken his mother's magic away, was that the ruin of his life was a thing to be comforted and dug up and healed until it was really healed, not just paved over. But ruining other people's lives was not going to heal him, any more than killing Voldemort would bring Sirius back to life. What killing Voldemort accomplished was killing Voldemort, nothing more or less. Oh, of course, the long-term consequences of that act would be a bit different, but they still wouldn't include Sirius coming back to life—or Sylaana, for that matter—or turning back time so that neither he nor Connor would ever bear their scars. What would happen was the protection of the future, so that Voldemort could not go on killing. Harry would protect the people still alive. He could do nothing for the dead. And it seemed a bit blind of Snape to believe that he could really make it as if Harry's childhood had never been.

Harry abruptly blinked and stared.

What if he doesn't think of it that way? What if he thinks of it the other way? What if he filed charges against my parents and Dumbledore not to change the past, but to change the future, and protect me from their ever doing me harm again?

If he did...if he did...

Then I am an idiot.

Harry blew out a breath, and blinked away angry tears for a moment. Then he changed his mind and let them come. There was no one here to see him. There was no one who could get through his wards. He could weep, and no one would scold him or pity him or be frightened when he could not stop crying.

And he could not stop crying.

He turned on his side and let the tears fall until his eyes were swollen and his breath came in hiccupping sobs, drawn as though there were a thick, musty blanket in his lungs. He reveled in the peace and the certainty that followed the weeping. He didn't have anything to prove to anybody. He didn't have to keep up a brave face, or cry just the way other people would expect him to.

And he didn't have to pretend that he wasn't angry at Snape. He was still angry. Understanding why Snape had done it wasn't the same thing as agreeing with him.

How dare he? How could he? Why didn't he come to me and explain it like this? I know that he thought I was unreasonable, but then, he had the greater duty as the reasonable one to try to persuade me, instead of just letting these darts fly.

And, anyway, it doesn't matter if he was reasonable or not, I still have the right to be angry at him if I like.

The table exploded. Harry could feel his magic boiling around him, and took several deep, gasping breaths, trying to force it back under control.

Then he wondered, Why? It's not as though there's anyone here to get frightened or hurt. I can let it explode if I like.

He shook his head, and released his magic around him, much like the storm of his memories, pouring it fully and freely out for the first time.

It stretched luxuriously, as deep as Voldemort's if not as strong, and surged. Harry smelled the scent of roses, and saw random flashes of light, and heard voices laughing and singing as the room appeared to tilt sideways. He was living in a disordered world that would have frightened anyone else.

It did not frighten him.

I don't need to be anything like what other people will expect me to be. I don't need to. I can understand them, and I can heal myself, but that doesn't mean that I need to be their perfect little portrait of the abused child, either. Why should I be? If this really is my life and my magic, my mind and my memories, and if I really do have the right to be a little selfish, the way that Draco said I could, then why should I have to react exactly the way they expect me to?

He did not have to, and in the same way he hurled his magic around his head in a loop and then let go of the tail by which he'd held it, smashing a hole open in the wall, he let go of the notion that he was ever going to be exactly what Snape wanted him to be, or Draco, or anyone else. Not everything he was needed to be healed. He was more than his wounds. He had to be, or he would rebuild himself in another image imposed on him from the outside. That this time it would be in the image of people who loved him, rather than people who feared him and wanted to control his magic, did not matter. It would still be someone else's picture of what he looked like.

He was more than that. He had been more than Lily's training, Dumbledore's warrior, James's neglected child. He was more than Snape's ward or Draco's love or Narcissa's adopted son, however much those roles might also be a part of him.

Harry stepped through the hole, his magic sliding around him, and looked up at the sky. The isolation wards, and his own Shield Charms, perceptibly dimmed the light of the full moon, but did not cause the same wavering effect on the stars, perhaps because the stars were too high and distant. Harry held out his hand, and, by a simple effort of will, enabled himself to see the starlight coiling in his palm.

Then he closed his fist, and turned some of his magic into thick black fog, and let it rise around him, and shut out the sight of even the house, and the grass, and the pond, and the moon. He was alone in the darkness, with the memory of the stars and the wind to sustain him, and another harsh truth.

Harry turned and faced it. His magic solidified into a mirror before him, a mirror that held no more than his own face. Of course, that was remarkable enough, since there was no light here to see the reflection by. So be it. He saw it anyway.

He quietly examined himself. Lightning bolt scar, missing hand—he had let the glamour fall away—bare arm where once Sylarana had clung. The other scars were not as visible, but present: Dragonsbane's death, Sirius's, the cracks that had parted him first from the rest of the world and then from his family, the mental damage Voldemort had inflicted on him, the hole where the phoenix web had been, the lack of knowledge about affection and social bonds that was instinctive to most other wizards he'd met, a wildness and raging temper, the broken barriers that had released his magic on the night Voldemort had come hunting, the dark stain caused by Rodolphus's murder and Mulciber's.

All marks of sacrifice. All places where he'd given something up or had something torn away. Even knowing that Dragonsbane had gone to his death willingly, that Sirius had committed suicide to keep Voldemort from using him against two boys he loved, that Sylarana had struck at Slytherin's basilisk in protective fury, that Rodolphus and Mulciber would have killed him if he hadn't killed them, could not change the fact of their deaths. Vengeance would never bring the dead back to life. Harry would never forget that.

There would be more casualties. The war had begun. He hadn't known what it really meant when he first trained for it. Connor had been the only human tie he'd had in the wider world when he left Godric's Hollow, the only one he was capable of having. So long as he kept him safe, Harry had not expected to feel the deaths of anyone else very much.

And he had. And other people had sacrificed enough, too, Merlin knew—freedom and innocence if nothing else. Power. Prestige. Life. Magic. Love.

And just as vengeance cannot answer vengeance...

Harry paused. If he were in an ordinary place, at an ordinary time, he might have said the words, and they would just be words. As he was now, before a mirror to which he could not lie, trying himself in the court of himself, he knew that saying the words would foster and force a change.

He stood on a hill and looked down into a darkened valley lit by lightning, and he thought that he still could have turned away.

Of course I could have. No one made me choose this. Most of the people who love me would prefer something less risky.

It was knowing that he had made the choice of his own free will which pushed him forward, made him say the words which echoed tinnily in the dimness.

“Sacrifice cannot answer sacrifice.”

Aloud, the words did not sound like much.

Inside him, they snatched the flying memories, and welded them together with his steel resolve, and spun a new pattern for him, less a plan of action than a skeleton of will and desire.

By my desire and by my will, I will do this. I do not know how to recognize all the sacrifices I make, not completely, unless I descend into myself every time, and I can't do that.

White fire burned up the reluctance to speak, the desire to keep secrets. Harry yielded it not as a sacrifice, but as something he no longer needed, freely discarded. He drew a deep breath.

I will try to talk. I will ask Draco to help. He notices more than anyone else when I'm hiding. I can't fool him as well.

He chose another thing, and threw it on the fire.

I will have to learn to accept my own limits. It's better to apply a little clever finesse with small power and effort than to strike with great power, wildly flailing, all the time. I will have to ask my allies what spells they can teach me that might actually counteract Voldemort. The Unforgivable Curses don't do it, nor Rosier's spells, nor my own newly invented ones. I tried them all in the graveyard, and he defeated them all. It will have to be traps that take him, multiple combinations of spells, and not straightforward duels. I will ask. I must ask.

Harry took a breath that fanned the flames higher, and another piece of his training burned, another spike of the skeleton burst into flower with his memories and his magic secured over and under it. There were blank places left where Harry hoped he would grow the necessary emotions over time. For now, the will to do the necessary things must be enough.

To learn the spells, to battle Voldemort, to talk, I must have people who will teach and listen to me. That means asking for aid, and holding my patience and my tongue when others seem slow. They know plenty of things that I don't, from growing up with people who did not—abuse them. I should listen. I'll still hate it at first, but maybe I can learn to rejoice in it. Maybe.

He knew he had one more piece of himself left to burn, but this was the most precious, the most long-guarded, and one he was especially slow to give up because it might seem as though he yielded it just to have an easier life. Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His Occlumency pools were almost all cracked open, the emotions they had contained blended with the new structure of his mind.

Save one.

Harry plunged his hand into it, and dragged forth his rage and his grief and his hatred and his confusion and his protective instincts over his parents.

He screamed, but not in pain. The darkness spasmed around him, and then broke, and Harry saw his magic spread, clawing at the ground like narrow roots. Where those roots passed, the grass and the earth they had touched simply ceased to exist. Slender grooves cut down and down into the dirt, their bottoms beyond Harry's eyesight. His magic crashed into the wards and the Shield Charms, and strained at them, devouring. Then it spread out and beyond them, and up. Harry lifted his head and bared his teeth at the stars.

I can hate them if I want. I can despise them for what they did to me. I can be madly glad that my magic's free, and not under their control any more.

Jagged dark patterns appeared above Harry, as if he were staring through bare branches at Midwinter. His magic ate the air, and left behind smooth, small traces of airless void.

I can feel pain, and know that I'll be dealing with what they did to me for the rest of my life.

His magic crashed into itself, screaming, and fell out of the sky in dark shards, landing around him in a pattering rain. Harry knew that Fawkes could find him now, but hoped the phoenix would know better than to try.

He held out his hand. The magic shot back to him and coiled there in a ball. Harry passed the stump of his left wrist into and out of it, and when he pulled it free, the skin was blue and numb with frostbite.

I can feel all those things. But ultimately, they're only emotions. And I'm free to feel other emotions towards them, too.

His magic burst free of the tiny ball, and golden light flooded the darkness around him. Deliberately, Harry made it the color of lamplight, not sunrise, the illumination that had once reached through the windows of Godric's Hollow to welcome Sirius or Remus home for the evening.

I can feel pity, if I want. I can feel protectiveness, when all the rest of the world does not feel it.

Harry felt the tears burst free again. Well, of course they would, given the way his thoughts were tending. As he knelt and wept because so much of his life and theirs had been wasted, the voice of his thoughts continued, wild and ringing.

I will not try to stop the trial from going forward. I will not lie. But along with not lying, I am going to tell everything, and that includes why I feel they deserve forgiveness now. If I do know exactly what they did to me, then I can forgive them. Hatred and forgiveness can exist in me at the same time. There is no one to say that they cannot.

Harry cast the last great reluctance within himself on the fire, and felt his mind flare and settle into the new pattern. It was incomplete. There were still things he would have to ask other people to help him with, including Draco and Snape and Connor and his allies and perhaps even the Seers, and Harry doubted that he would ever feel exactly what other people did—that every nuance of his earlier life was detestable, for example, or that love was easy. He might be equal to them, but he was not identical.

And then he was flung back from the distance he'd occupied as judge and jury and executioner of himself, as his mind united again, and the emotions and the tears overcame him entirely.

Sometime later, when his eyes were swollen until he nearly could not see and the eastern sky was lightening with dawn that he didn't remember having missed the beginning of, Harry sat up and stared to the south. He knew Malfoy Manor lay in that direction, and that he would have to go back there now that he'd created himself over again.

He didn't want to. He could acknowledge that.

But this was the first test that he had to put himself through. Before, when someone gave him a new prohibition, like Snape telling him that he must stay within the walls and wards of Hogwarts or Draco promising that he'd hit him with a Stunning Spell if he didn't stay out of danger, Harry hadn't taken it seriously. Those were only limits. He

could surpass limits. There was no question but that he would have to, if someone else's life were in danger.

If he had really changed, if he really meant this, then he would have to go back to his very displeased allies, tell them the truth, and let them impose what punishments and restrictions they would. And he would have to do that of his own free will, and truly submit to them, not yield on the surface and plan to keep his promises only if it suited him.

Harry wished he knew how to assume the lynx form outside of dreams, so he had a tail to lash and ears to flatten.

Well. No one had demanded that he creep back with a penitent heart. Only that he come back.

Harry stood, and glanced once at Godric's Hollow. It looked different now, with the hole in the side of the house and half the isolation wards eaten away. It should, Harry thought. He'd gone through enough changes that he would have been shocked if the house had looked exactly the same.

He turned away again, and, drawing on his connection to the wards of Malfoy Manor, he went home.

Intermission: Punishments

Narcissa closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall of the entrance hall in the Manor. She had reached the stage where her throat hurt from lack of sleep, but she did not feel able to rest until Harry returned from wherever he had vanished to.

If it were not for his vanishing, she thought, as she placed one hand over her throat and held it there, then she would have counted the evening an entire success. Three of the Weasleys had come out of the house to aid in the fighting, and aside from a few tense stares, they hadn't shown any reaction when they realized who was rescuing them. Narcissa supposed they might even have made a difference towards driving the seven Death Eaters who had lived away. She couldn't tell for certain. She had no interest in telling for certain.

Most of her attention, from the time that Harry went into battle against the Dark Lord, had been focused on him.

Narcissa closed her eyes and shuddered. The fog that had risen around Harry and Voldemort had been like nothing else she had ever seen—as if the heat and power behind a storm had emerged in a form she could comprehend at a glance. She had expected Harry would die at any moment. It might be in the nature of Voldemort to survive such storms, but she knew too well that Harry was only a boy, and one considerably more fragile than he allowed himself to look or feel. So she had fought with her glance continually darting off, split between the duel and her own son.

Draco had done well, and not even given her a cause for panic, save when he had tumbled on his face just as one of the Death Eaters rushing at Lucius's back lifted her wand. Narcissa could not remember crossing the ground between him and herself, only that she must have, but by the time she arrived at his feet, he was climbing back to them. Narcissa had ducked hastily away before he could accuse her of hovering over him.

He did need to learn to survive on his own, just as Harry did.

Well, no, Harry already knows it. Narcissa blinked and opened her eyes, her fingers running absently over her neck this time. And if the War comes to us when Draco is this age, of course he would insist on fighting rather than being left behind. I will have to learn to accept this.

A pair of hands descended on her shoulders, steering her around and holding her so they could roughly massage the muscles. Narcissa sighed and braced her arms against the wall. Lucius murmured in her ear, "You are thinking about him?"

"Of course I am." Narcissa glanced at her husband. He looked only more like himself, not less, despite the long, thin wound that scored his cheek. "You are, as well."

Lucius inclined his head. "Only thinking that he was foolish."

Narcissa hummed softly and closed her eyes. Adalrico had felt the presence of her cousin Regulus in his head the moment after Harry vanished, informing them all that he had gone to Godric's Hollow. That presented quite a problem, of course, since none of them knew where it was. Draco had suggested letting an owl fly and then following it, but none of the adults were in any condition to fly a broom at first, and Lucius said quietly that if Draco tried to go alone, he would find himself disowned. Then Harry's phoenix appeared, crooning in distress, and Narcissa could see her son sag, giving the idea up. If Fawkes could not find Harry, then none of them would.

They knew where he was. They had only to wait for him to come back.

"Narcissa. Lucius."

Narcissa looked up, blinking. Hawthorn was facing them in human form, her face pale. Narcissa darted a glance out the window. Yes, it was indeed dawn, leaving Hawthorn able to change back. Narcissa let her breath out an inch at a time, and told herself that she had no proof that Harry was hurting more the longer he stayed away.

"How are your wounds?" she asked Hawthorn.

Hawthorn shrugged slightly. "I will live." She moved an imperfectly healed shoulder in circles as Narcissa watched, then shifted her weight from her left leg to her right and grimaced. Greyback had bitten her several times. Narcissa had done what she could with the medical magic she knew, and Elfrida, skilled in healing her own children, had helped as well, but they did not dare take Hawthorn to St. Mungo's. The Healers would recognize werewolf bites. They would confine Hawthorn and demand that she register with the Ministry, and, in truth, their only mistake would be in thinking that Hawthorn had become infected this night and not almost two years ago.

Hawthorn was quite insistent that she remain free, and Narcissa could hardly blame her. Their world was not kind to werewolves, or former Death Eaters.

Or to boys who do not know they are abused.

Narcissa winced as the thought of Harry came back to her, slamming harder into her mind for those minutes of being denied. She almost wanted to stand on her toes and look out the Manor windows, but she knew what she would see: dawn, and no one circling back on a broom. It was ludicrous to think that Harry would return that way, anyway. He hadn't left on a broom, so why should he return on one?

A movement off to the side caught Narcissa's eye. She glanced over to see her son standing there disconsolately, his face lackluster, nearly lifeless.

If there was ever any doubt that Draco loved Harry, I would discard it now. Narcissa looked at Lucius to see if he had noticed, and surprised a slight frown on his face. He smoothed it away at once, but she knew it had been there, and knew why. He thinks Draco weak for expressing his emotions in this way.

Narcissa suppressed an irritated sigh. She hated the arguments between her husband and son, but she could not interfere in this particular one. They were both Malfoy by blood and birth; she was only so by marriage. She could not force Lucius to declare Draco his

magical heir, and attempts to persuade him had resulted in her husband walking out of the room.

Abruptly, the air in front of them cracked open, and a house elf tumbled out of it, squeaking. Hawthorn, wounded as she was, had faced it before any of the others could move, Narcissa noted. She felt a moment's pained envy. There were times she thought she could contract the curse for the sake of a werewolf's reflexes and senses.

"Mifi has come to say that Master Harry Potter has returned," said the elf, which was as far as she got before Draco was trying to half-strangle her.

"Where, Mifi?" he demanded. "What room?"

"The Blue Reception Room—"

Draco began to run. Narcissa hastened after him. She could hear Hawthorn gamely following, and Lucius refusing to walk faster than a dignified stroll. Along the way, they passed Adalrico's and Elfrida's door, and Hawthorn rapped smartly, exchanging a few low-voiced words with them to let them know Harry was back.

Narcissa tasted cautious relief mingling with the worry in her mouth. There was no telling what condition Harry might have returned in, after all.

But when they opened the door and saw him standing in front of the hearth, lifting his head from contemplation of the flames and blinking at them, then Narcissa felt justified in permitting relief and worry to give way to anger.

I promised him there would be consequences for risking his life needlessly. I will see that he suffers them.

Lucius felt the difference the moment he came into the Blue Reception Room and saw Harry waiting for them, his head slightly lifted and his green eyes bright with a mixture of emotions in which the uppermost one was puzzlement. He halted. Adalrico, of course, pushed past him and strode over to the boy, staring down at him.

“You ran away without permission from the battle,” he said. “Not telling us whether you were wounded, not telling us why you were going or what you wished to do, but simply running away. That is not the action of an effective general, Harry.”

“That’s because I’m not an effective general yet,” said Harry, lifting his head further to study Adalrico. “I’ve never been trained to act in concert with others, never realized I should take advantage of their strengths as well as my own. I believe I’ve undergone an experience now that will let me do that. Will you teach me what an effective general is?”

Adalrico stared. So did the women, and Draco, who had made his way to Harry’s side and had one arm clamped around his waist in a death grip. Narcissa was caught the least flat-footed, Lucius saw, but even she frowned slightly, as though she could not understand how Harry spending one night away from them would have changed him so fundamentally.

Of all of them, Lucius thought, I am the only one who understands.

He caught Harry’s eyes and held them, confirming his impression. Yes. He was the only one who had made a habit of continually feeling out Harry’s magic, even when he didn’t use it to do something overtly impressive. He knew the moments when it grew sharp-edged, and what that indicated about Harry’s emotional state. He knew the moments when it pulled in, and Harry tried to hide. He knew when it was spreading, and would probably cause a new storm in a few moments. Years of observing his Lord in this way had been worth the headaches. Lucius had been able to predict better than most Death Eaters what the Dark Lord would do next.

One thing that had always reassured him about Harry’s power—though, if asked, he would have said it was worrisome and not reassuring—was its fragility. It never intruded. It rarely pressed, unless he was so angry that he did not think to ask permission. Most of the time, Harry concentrated on keeping it as unnoticeable as possible, with an effort so deep that Lucius no longer thought it conscious.

Now, his magic spread throughout the room, causing a faint, dull, buzzing ache in Lucius's teeth, and did not apologize for itself. Something had indeed changed. While he had to trust that Harry would not declare himself a Lord, he was more Lord-like than Lucius had ever known him to be.

Draco was now demanding an explanation. Harry was going to give one. First, though, he stared back at Lucius, saying that he knew the reason for that continued scrutiny.

And that he no longer feared him.

Harry looked away, and Lucius blinked and loosed a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. His own eyes narrowed as they focused on the side of Harry's face.

He would have to step more carefully from now on. He could no longer be certain of knowing more about emotions than the boy did.

He refused to admit that that made his life a bit more exciting than it had been before. Only children thought excitement an unmixed good. Draco hadn't said much of anything at first, because joy and rage together were choking him.

He was relieved that Harry had come back safe. Of course he was. He bore no wounds, and his eyes had a look of clear sanity that Draco hadn't seen in them for days, and he wore no glamour over his left wrist.

But the rage...

Surely he was allowed to rage when Harry had dashed off and left them with no warning, only a secondary one come through Adalrico's lips? Of course he was. And when he realized that Regulus had told them against Harry's will, not as a precaution, disappointment had almost drowned his anger. He had held off on pressing Harry because he truly believed that he needed the time and the space to heal. And now it seemed as if they only made him worse, as if there

were nothing to be done. Harry would reject a too-close concern, but he would not heal without it.

One new thing he had rapidly discovered about himself was his hatred of being helpless. In that way, Draco thought, he was similar to Harry.

So, now, he held Harry tight with one arm, and he could not feel this was a continuation of all the times that had come before, the times when Harry would venture out, risk his life, and return relatively intact. This time, he felt differently. He put a hand beneath Harry's chin and forcibly turned his face from Harry's staring contest with his father. He supposed Harry might be uncomfortable with Draco touching him so intimately in front of other people, but he did not give a damn.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"Godric's Hollow," said Harry quietly. He let Draco turn his face, manipulate it, with his eyes reflecting nothing more than a faint impatience. "No one was there. I went there because I thought I should face the home where my parents abused me."

Draco's fingers opened, and his hand fell limply from Harry's face to his side. He found himself staring again. Yes, Harry might have learned that he needed other people to teach him about war in Godric's Hollow—though Draco could not have imagined how—but that he would face this...that he would come this far...

"You're lying," he whispered.

"I am not," said Harry quietly. He turned just enough away from Draco so that the rest of them could clearly hear what he said. "I am a Legilimens." Draco saw a start and ripple travel through several of the adults. "I tore my own mind apart with that magic, and put it back together again. Memories, emotions, the truths that I use to guide and govern my life. All of it. All of it got torn apart and burned, then reassembled. I hope that I have a better idea of how to act like a normal person now, though I'll never be ordinary." He shrugged, as if he hadn't just made the most astonishing statement Draco had ever heard him make. "That's what I went there to do."

Draco drew a breath. He wanted to shout for joy, but rage was easier, and he should be dealt with first.

"That was insanely dangerous," he said.

"I know," said Harry, turning and looking at him again. "I'm sorry for the regret and pain and worry you suffered over it."

"You aren't sorry you did it," Draco probed.

"No," said Harry. "If I were, then I would have to doubt the conclusions I came to. And I don't. This was the only way."

Draco leaned nearer Harry, and pictured those bright eyes he loved closed or stilled forever, the face streaked with blood and silence, the body crumpled behind wards he could never remove in time to save his life.

He realized he was crying. He could not care. "You could have died."

"I know."

Draco punched him in the arm. "You don't know, Harry, not if you can stand there and respond in that calm tone."

Harry pulled back from him, and for the first time in two weeks, his eyes grew wide and flashed. "Yes, Draco, I know. I know I could have died. I took the risk anyway. From now on, I am going to try and find less risky ways. I know that I tend to sacrifice myself, and I literally can't imagine any other way of doing things most of the time." Harry spread his hands. "You can help me there. But I can't feel just what you want me to feel, Draco. You'll only get in trouble if you insist on judging me by the way you would react in a situation like this."

Draco swallowed. He wasn't sure which he had to struggle with more: the sob or the accusation. He looked closely at Harry.

Harry stared back at him, face bright with impatience and hope and challenge and expectation. Draco felt lost. He did not know the expression.

Then he realized that was because he'd never seen it before.

The world tore open around him, and Draco steadied himself against the sensation of freefall with a few deep breaths. He could handle this. He had been thinking of himself as a changing person, and couldn't he change to meet this, or in response to this?

Well, yes, I can, he realized. I thought I'd be a teacher to Harry, though, knowing myself better than he knew himself, able to show him all these wonders that he'd never realized existed.

I suppose I should have known better than to think he'd sit still that long.

Draco smiled slightly, and that made Harry blink and start back. Draco took Harry's hand.

"I did say that I would punish you if you ran off again," he said. "And that includes even for going to Godric's Hollow and relearning yourself."

Harry inclined his head once. The gesture was deep, formal. Draco supposed that there was more than a trace of the old Harry left, still, and that made him able to smile as he pronounced the punishment.

"Sleeping spells and Body-Binds and the like don't do a thing unless they come in before the fact," he said. "And I've decided that I'm unlikely to know every time you're about to dash off."

"I will try to be better about that—"

Draco went on as if he hadn't heard. "You made a promise to me to be better about that, and you broke it. That means that I need some kind of magical guarantee, Harry."

Harry tilted his head. "You want me to swear an oath?"

“Of course not.” Draco leaned towards him and took his chin in hand again, making Harry look at him. “You would word the oath in such a way that you could get out of it. No, Harry, I’m talking about a monitoring spell. It would tell me when you’re about to leave the building where it’s cast, and prevent you from doing so if I willed it. We can cast one for the Manor, and a new one when we go back to Hogwarts.” He stared straight into Harry’s eyes. “That’s the punishment I want. Can you accept that?”

Harry breathed deeply. Draco knew the impulses passing behind his eyes, because they would have been his, too: the urge to say that this was unfair, to point out that a monitoring spell wouldn’t solve everything, that this was a solution Draco shouldn’t have had to resort to because he should trust Harry’s word.

Against all of those, Draco only repeated, “That’s the punishment I want.”

Harry dropped his eyes, and, incredibly, only nodded.

Draco drew his wand before Harry could change his mind. He did trust his resolve, but Harry might come up with an even better idea in a few moments, one that just happened to be less restrictive.

“Investigo Harry Potter!” he whispered. He’d looked up the spell during his one productive hour of the night, imagining what he would do to Harry if Harry had the gall to return unwounded.

Harry shivered a bit as the spell tumbled down around him, but didn’t complain. Draco rubbed a hand across his shoulder. He was still reeling from the knowledge that this had happened and Harry had allowed it—and also from the bond the monitoring spell was creating in his mind—but he recognized that Harry needed to be reassured about what had happened.

That done, he let Harry turn to face the adults, to learn what his punishment should be from them.
People’s scents didn’t change that fast.

That disconcerted Hawthorn far more than anything else, though perhaps only because the full moon had shone last night. She kept wrinkling her nose and sniffing, trying to find some trace of the familiar Harry Potter, the one surrounded by pain and fatigue, long after Narcissa had begun, in a level voice, to elaborate why Harry would not be allowed to read any book heavier than one of fey tales for a week, and why he would go to bed the moment the sun set for the rest of the summer, and why he would not, on pain of having her back turned on him, communicate with his parents in any form or fashion before the trial began.

But his scent had changed. Oh, Hawthorn would have known him on the street still, among a dozen other wizards, but the edge of collapse was gone.

That was not possible.

Hawthorn did not know much about Legilimency; that was true. And she knew that sometimes, a witch could escape grief and pain by throwing herself into something new. Pansy's studies in necromancy were proceeding apace because she exhausted her attention in them, to avoid having to think about her father. Hawthorn had allowed herself one night of severe weeping for Dragonsbane, and then she had put her game face back on and continued.

But this...

There must still be buried wounds. There must still be weak points that an enemy could exploit if Harry wasn't careful.

The problem was that Hawthorn couldn't smell them.

Harry turned away from the list of Narcissa's punishments at last, and caught her eye. At once, he frowned. "Why are you standing differently, Mrs. Parkinson?" he asked. "Were you wounded?"

He shifted just then, and his left wrist came free of his sleeve, and Hawthorn saw his missing hand. She knew Narcissa had said something about that at some point, but since Harry had apparently

worn a glamour- an effective one, at that- Hawthorn had assumed she'd misunderstood about his actually losing it.

He'd lost his hand, and he'd gone through a mental and emotional transformation that changed his scent, and he still had the keenness of eye necessary to notice how her stance had changed with the wounds she'd received from Greyback.

Those three facts combined and swirled around in Hawthorn's mind until she didn't think she could say anything other than what she said next.

"I am very well, child," she said. "And ready to follow you anywhere."

Harry's mouth curled in a small smile. That was nothing compared to the emotions his eyes flared with, though, or the fact that he shifted his hold on Draco to put out his hand to her.

Hawthorn came and pressed it, staring into his face. And a question she'd asked herself over and over- whether she had really been right to forgive Harry for Dragonsbane's death, when it caused Pansy such pain- was answered at last.

Yes. Yes, I was. He is making good use of the life that Dragonsbane saved for him.

Oh, my love. I hope you can see him now, that the eyes of the dead are not that different. You would be so proud of him.

It was not proper, most of the time, for puellaris witches to be angry. They kept their eyes on the ground and spoke courteous words to their husbands. Outside the home, they were in a world they did not understand, one they had deliberately given up understanding of. Elfrida found it hard enough to focus and function in her day-to-day job with Gringotts. She blushed to imagine confronting men and speaking to them the way she knew her husband had to, all the time.

But when a child was hurt...

Then, it would not have been a proper puellaris witch who could remain calm, and Elfrida was very well-trained. She had been a moment from growing fangs ever since she had heard of the abuse that Harry's parents had put him through.

He was a child, and Elfrida would transform and rend Lily Potter apart if she ever came into sight of her. It did not matter that that would break the family alliance, and cause her to bleed to death. It would happen. Her soul made it impossible for things to fall out otherwise.

Therefore, Elfrida knew, she would not attend the trial. Adalrico had told her that Lily Potter needed to live, and be tried. Most wizards and witches would not see the justice in a lioness ripping her apart, no matter what her crimes had been. Harry especially would not see the justice.

So Elfrida had something else to offer him, and when he turned away from Hawthorn, she offered it.

"Harry," she said. His eyes came at once to her face, and she saw the struggling trust in them reflected with wariness. It was a conflict she was familiar with, having seen it in Millicent's face more than once, as she found herself magical heir to her father and began to grow from a child. "I am not going to punish you, child," she said quietly. "I wish to talk with you. Once a week during the summer, I think, and even that often during the school year if we can manage it."

Harry studied her in silence, and then nodded. His expression said plainly that he didn't understand why she wanted to talk to him.

Elfrida bowed her head. He would not accept the reasons if she stated them. She wanted to remind him that he was still a child, that he had plenty of time to come to adulthood. She wanted to help raise him.

And if there was anything puellaris witches knew something about, it was raising children.

Elfrida sent a cold thought towards Lily Potter, hoping she could hear it. You didn't want him. So he's ours now. And I am going to make

sure that he knows it. Separate him gently from his family. Everyone else is much too impatient, rushing through this. You can't rush growth. And he will grow. I will see to it. He is not Millicent or Marian, but then, he is not my daughter. He is my son.

Adalrico studied Harry in silence. He knew things had changed. If nothing else, Harry asking them to train him in battle strategy would have marked it.

He was coming to realize that not enough had changed, though. He had wondered, when he heard about the child abuse charges, why Harry had not contacted them first. Did he not know the Bulstrodes would follow him into the heart of the Dark Lord's stronghold, and that had had been true since he saved Elfrida's and Marian's lives?

Well, no. I don't think that he knows. Did we ever tell him?

They hadn't, Adalrico had to acknowledge ruefully. He had expected Harry to realize, as any child raised in a Dark pureblood home would, what it meant that Harry had enabled a magical heir to survive as well as her mother. Magic was more important than blood. Preserving life would have occasioned a debt, but nothing like what insuring that Elfrida lived as a witch and not a Squib or Muggle did. And Harry had given of his own magic to do it.

Adalrico's mind slammed shut at the thought of such a sacrifice. Only for one of his own children would he have been able to do it, and even then, he would have wanted the promise that they would live and use the magic for purposes he would have approved of, rather than wasting it. Harry had asked for no such promise, merely poured the magic out. Adalrico had actually been the one to stop the pouring, when he could sense his wife's magical presence as strong as it was before she bore Marian. Otherwise, Harry might have given up more and more of his own power.

Their family was what it was because of him.

And they had not told him that.

Well, there is more than one way to remedy that, Adalrico thought, as he arranged to return to the Manor as often as possible during the

summer and give Harry private lessons in strategy. I can slip in lessons about what he is, who he is, during my other teaching of him. When he realizes how many among the Dark purebloods regard him-as someone incredibly gifted but willing to share that gift with others...

He will recover his self-confidence. He must. This is a glorious step forward along the path, but it is not enough.

Harry let Draco follow him into his bedroom. It would have been useless to try and keep him out, but this time, Harry actually wanted him there.

He supposed that might change soon, but for today, it had not. He could think of nothing better than curling up and going to sleep in Draco's arms.

As soon as he had finished two letters, of course.

With a soft reaching out of his magic and mind, he called both Fawkes and Hedwig to him. Fawkes scolded him and nipped his ear and scolded him again, visions of Harry dying appearing regularly in his mind. Hedwig softly hooted her disapproval every few moments. Harry ignored them as best he could, and instead scribbled out the notes, while Draco, sprawled on the bed, watched him in silence.

Connor:

I wanted to reassure you that I'm all right. Much better, actually. I thought about some of the things you said, and they helped me come to terms with the abuse. (See, I can even call it that now!) I hope the Weasleys escaped the battle unwounded. For the foreseeable future, I'll be at Malfoy Manor, so feel free to write to me here.

Love,

Your brother, Harry.

He gave that letter to Fawkes, and asked him to wait for a response. Fawkes chirped at him, good humor evidently restored by the chance to act as a messenger, and vanished in a ball of flames.

That left the second blank piece of parchment. Harry stared at it for a while, drumming his fingers on the table, and finally hissed at the hooting Hedwig to be quiet. She blinked grave disapprobation at him.

Draco watched from the bed, and Harry's own conscience watched from within his mind.

Waiting wouldn't make it easier. Harry plunged his quill into the ink and scribbled as fast as he could without making the letter illegible.

Dear Professor:

I was involved in a battle this past night, but I'm safe, and unwounded. Recovering from the effects of a Compression Curse, but that's to be expected. I'm just glad that I took no worse from the Dark Lord.

I tore my mind open with my own Legilimency and created it again, and now I understand why you filed the charges against my parents and Dumbledore. You were trying to protect my future, and me. I still wish you hadn't done it. There were better ways to address the issue. I don't feel up to seeing you yet and telling you that, but you can rail at me by letter, if you want. I invite you to write me back. Just don't assume I'll agree with you for a long time, if I ever do.

He hesitated over the ending words again, but finally wrote his name, and bound the letter to Hedwig's leg. "Snape," he said quietly. She skimmed out the window and vanished.

Then, finally, Harry felt able to lie down in his bed and let Draco surround him with tight, greedy arms. He closed his eyes, and felt Draco press a sleepy kiss to the back of his neck. He shivered. There were ways in which simply accepting this comfort was harder than coming back to Malfoy Manor had been.

But the first step on the road was taken now.

Now he only had to go on taking them- at once a hard task and an enormously simple one. At least he knew that he would never have a harsher judge than himself.

He did consider, briefly, how angry Regulus must be with him, not to have returned to his mind yet, but then he pushed the thought away. He refused to worry about the state of other people's anger when he'd done so much worrying already and Regulus refused to speak. He would explain his actions to Regulus when and if he returned. For the present, he had done all he could.

Quietly, warm and safe and comfortable and loved, he went to sleep.

Chapter Eight: Eye of the Storm

Rufus stood in front of the cell doors and idly twirled his wand between his fingers. Mallory, standing at his back, his only guard for the moment, said nothing. The door in front of him said nothing. The walls to either side of him said nothing.

Of course they didn't, Rufus thought. No one is here to save you from looking stupid, as Grandmother Leonora would say, but yourself.

He shook his head and opened the door. The warding spells had already dropped to a quiet buzz that would only arrest the movement of a prisoner through the door, and he'd undone the mundane lock. He had no excuse for not going in anymore, except his own reluctance to see the prisoner.

The door swung open to reveal a cell smaller and more barren than usual. It was Rufus's way of compromising: there were instincts he'd developed working as an Auror that demanded even worse treatment than this, but they were joined by ones just as strong that argued for him treating these offenders the same as any others.

Even if they were child abusers.

Lily Evans Potter scrambled up and stood facing him as he and Mallory moved into the room. Her face was tense, and if she had lost sleep in the two weeks since she'd come here, Rufus couldn't really blame her. Her hair was lank and dangled around her shoulders, and her green eyes, the ones he'd last seen in her son's face, were half-glazed.

Rufus gritted his teeth. He had wanted to move the Potters' trial as fast as possible, but still had only managed to fix a trial date for mid-November. There were too many people who wanted to look at the evidence, or had a reason for delaying the imprisonment or execution of the Potters so they could gawk some more. Even finding someone to lead the questioning in the Wizengamot, someone who had no ties to either Harry Potter or Dumbledore, had taken forever.

He owed Lily Potter at least an explanation of what would happen. He reminded himself that he never had to see her again after this.

She denied her son sweetness that even the poorest of children can afford. She denied him love. She denied him any existence beyond being the sword that his brother would wield without knowing it.

All of those things were true, but Rufus kept his purpose clearly in mind. When he was an Auror, it had never been this hard. Why should becoming the Minister have changed him so much?

Because you know Harry. You are biased yourself. And it has been years since you saw a child abuse case this extensive and detailed.

Rufus sharpened his mind to a small, clear point of light, the way Grandmother Leonora had taught him, and then said, in a voice he kept carefully devoid of emotion, "Lily Evans Potter, you already know that you are charged with child abuse. I am here to tell you that your trial will take place on the sixteenth of November. You will be tried with your husband, James Potter. Albus Dumbledore's trial will take place somewhat later. Until the date of the trial, you will remain in this cell. You will be well-treated, receive proper food and care—"

He had to stop there, though it wasn't quite the end of the formal speech he'd planned. The memory of the fact that Lily would receive such treatment when Harry hadn't was choking him.

It was unfortunate that he stopped when he did, though, because it provided an opportunity for Lily to speak up.

"You have to understand," she whispered, her eyes glittering with tears. Her face was becoming streaked with them, too, and from the way she winced as she wiped at them, it wasn't the first time they had made her skin stiff and tender. "I did what I did for the greater good of the world. I really did think Connor was the Boy-Who-Lived. I thought Harry's magic was unnatural. We had to do everything that we did so the world could have a chance."

Rufus's eyes narrowed. She really did think that Connor Potter was the Boy-Who-Lived? Why would she think differently now? He kept

his voice polite and distant, however, as he did in the face of declarations from all prisoners, child abusers or no. “You will have a chance to explain everything that you thought and believed in your trial, Mrs. Potter. The Wizengamot will question you, and you will have a chance to call witnesses in your defense. Do you have anyone you wish to call?”

“Yes,” said Lily, and her lip quivered. “I know that my son wouldn’t like what you’re doing to me. I want to call him.”

“Which son, madam?” Rufus asked, hoping she didn’t mean—

“Harry.” Lily gave an imperious little stamp of her foot. “I want him called as a witness for the defense. He knows all the reasons behind the way we raised him. He can explain them better than I can. How dare you accuse us without listening to the way he explains things first?” She shook her head and tossed her lank red hair over one shoulder, her eyes bright and hopeful again. “I know that he’ll convince you.”

Rufus kept his voice bland. Thank Merlin there are laws in place forbidding this, or I would be tempted to scream. “The words of abused children about their abusers are not often trusted in trials, madam. Either they are too vehement, or they protect the people who abused them and try to minimize what really happened.” That’s Harry in a nutshell. “Your son will indeed be speaking in the trial, but as the person whom the case was brought for. He will be in a neutral place, neither prosecution nor defense but victim, and he will give his evidence how and as he wishes.”

“Let me talk to him,” Lily insisted. “I know that I can convince him to change his mind about that.”

She probably could. Though Rufus hoped the boy was stronger now than he had been the night he faced James Potter, he would still not want to leave Harry and one of his parents alone in a room together. “I will not do that, madam,” he said.

“You can’t keep a mother from talking to her own child.”

That proved too much for Mallory, whom Rufus had felt silently seething behind him, but whom he had hoped would manage to ignore this. “You aren’t his mother!” she snapped. “You’re just the worthless bag of shit whose womb he crawled out of, the one who heaped punishments he didn’t earn on him! I can’t believe that I chose as mild a spell as I did—“

Lily was shrinking away from her, one hand over her mouth, making small fearful noises. Rufus felt a shock surge through him, and then he turned around and gripped Auror Mallory’s arm.

“You did not,” he said.

Mallory tilted her head back and directed a superior expression at him, half-frown and half-sneer.

Rufus could feel himself shaking, he was so angry. He bit off the words as he said, “If there is anything else that you wish to question me about, Mrs. Potter, send word by your guards. From now on, they will include Auror Feverfew.” He opened the door of the cell and stepped back out into the corridor. Mallory still came with him because she had no choice, given his hand on her arm.

Rufus let her go the moment they were out in the hall, of course. He really had lost control, and he hadn’t meant to. Much better to turn, to hide his anger behind a mask of cool disappointment, and to ask, “Why the Unending Nightmares Curse, Fiona? Why did you use that one on her?”

“Who says I did?” Mallory examined the back of her hand.

“I recognize the signs,” said Rufus. Perhaps, if he stared at Mallory’s forehead, he would keep himself from snapping. Then she lifted her head, and her eyes met his, fearless and defiant, and he heard himself snarling the words again. “And you said yourself that you’d used a spell. Fiona, I do not care how much you hate the Potters, or how much they remind you of your father. I accepted you into the Aurors because you’d reassured me that you wanted to help abused children and see the abusers brought to justice, not vengeance. Using this curse is a violation of that trust.”

"They deserved it," said Mallory.

"They?" Rufus closed his eyes, as furious with his own misjudgment of what Mallory could handle as anything else. He should have known. Just because he had become Minister, and therefore less in charge of the day-to-day affairs of the Aurors, didn't mean he'd forgotten everything he learned about his people. "You used it on James Potter, too?" She couldn't have attacked Dumbledore, at least, since he was under the Still-Beetle confinement.

"They deserved it," Mallory repeated stubbornly. "They really did, Rufus. You've read the evidence itself, not just the stories in the papers. You must think they merit evisceration even more than I do. But you can't eviscerate them, and neither can I, so this is the next best thing. Eviscerate their minds instead."

Rufus shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. It was long moments, and thick breaths, before he could say, "They deserve justice, Fiona, just as anyone else does. And if that includes execution, then the Wizengamot will decide it. I trust them to bring down a sentence of utmost severity. Not only was Harry Potter horribly abused, he is the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived, and this gossip is so juicy that the papers are still tugging and pulling at it. But to make sure the prisoners survive and get to justice, I trust my Aurors to maintain a professional calm. You've proven you can't do that. As of this moment, you're off this case, Fiona."

He opened his eyes to see her staring at him. She shook her head and laughed a bit. "You can't do that," she said.

"Yes, actually, I can," said Rufus slowly. Betrayal still burned like a wound within him, but he recovered some of his own equilibrium as he watched Mallory's shock turn into betrayal of her own. "You control the affairs of the Aurors, Fiona, and no more than that. The Minister is supposed to be aware of what's going on in his own organization, and I am your boss. I could have you sacked for incompetence, but I'm not going to, because I believe that you can still be just if you try. For now, take a leave of absence from this case. Don't deal with any of the evidence on it. Don't come here to guard the prisoners—which

the Head of the Auror Office shouldn't be doing anyway. Don't give interviews to the newspapers."

"How long?" Mallory was shaking, her hands clenched at her side.

"Until the Potters' trial," said Rufus quietly. "The sixteenth of November."

"Who exactly is going to take over my duties here?" Mallory's eyes flared and snapped. "At least half the owls we get nowadays are about the Potter case. Yesterday we got the first feigned report of a magical accident, just to draw my people out of the Ministry so someone could try to get juicy details."

Rufus hid his smile. At least Mallory was thinking like an Auror again, if she was indignant that her people's time was being wasted.

"I have someone who's used to handling plenty of owls," he said. "He's helped me work the Death Eater cases, and he did almost all the secretarial work during the last months I was Head."

Mallory looked slightly sick. "You're talking about your damn Percy Weasley again, aren't you?"

Rufus raised an eyebrow and waited.

"He's your running hound, Rufus," Mallory grumbled. "He sticks his nose into everything and questions it in accordance with that strict set of standards that you taught him. Yeah, I think he'd do well with the Potter case, but would he really give those bastards and that bitch justice?"

"There you go again, Fiona," said Rufus. "You can depend on the Wizengamot to give them justice. You can depend on Percy to make sure that they reach trial alive."

A dull flush spread over Mallory's cheeks. "I wouldn't have killed them. The Unending Nightmares Curse doesn't kill, you know that. I want to see them stand trial just as much as you do."

“Did you ever read about the Unending Nightmares Curse in detail, Fiona?” Rufus probed. “Do you really know what it does to its victims? Eviscerates their minds, you said. You aren’t far wrong. But it doesn’t do that just when they’re asleep. They suffer from it when they’re awake, too. The sight of you caused Lily Potter pain. People have gone mad from it. Disorder their minds, Fiona, and they’ll just go straight into St. Mungo’s and be unable to stand trial.” It wasn’t what he wanted to use to appeal to her—he should have just been able to use her own innate sense of justice—but what weapons he had to use to make sure that Lily and James Potter reached trial relatively unharmed and that his Auror didn’t make herself into a worse criminal than she already had, he would.

Mallory looked away and mumbled something.

“What was that?” Rufus demanded, leaning closer.

“I said I didn’t know that!” Mallory burst out, turning around again and glaring at him. Her face looked as if it were on fire now, and the air around her blazed with magic. “I told you, I do want them to stand trial, and have to talk about and testify to their mistakes in front of the whole world.”

Rufus held her eyes. She’s embarrassed. Good. I might have more of a chance of getting through to her than I anticipated. “I know what you suffered, Fiona,” he said quietly. “Know better than most people.” The redness climbed Mallory’s cheeks again. Doubtless she was remembering the night she’d got pissed and told him most of the story. “And I know that you wouldn’t want to use it as an excuse. It’s a reason, but never let it be an excuse. I know that you’re an Auror because you love and value justice, and not just for abused children. Don’t limit your effectiveness to help others because you want to punish two of them so badly.”

Mallory bowed her head, and nodded. Her magic had retreated into her body again. “I know,” she whispered. “I forgot, Rufus. And I honestly didn’t know what side effects that curse might have.”

“Stay away from the prisoners, Fiona,” said Rufus, with iron gentleness. “I’ll contact St. Mungo’s and summon one of the Healers

over to remove the curse. It hasn't gone far enough yet to hurt her permanently."

Mallory nodded once, and then retreated in silence up the corridor. Feverfew stepped out of the shadows a moment later, his eyes understanding and his lips sealed, and took up his position in front of Lily Potter's door.

Rufus turned to make his way to James Potter, wondering if Mallory had used the Unending Nightmares Curse more on him than she had on Lily, or if they had suffered the same amount. Well, the healer from St. Mungo's could be the one to find that out. Rufus's business was justice, the clean cutting and cauterization of wounds through legal means, preventing the infection from spreading further. He was no healer of mental wounds.

I leave that up to Madam Shiverwood, he thought, with an inner grimace. I must send Harry a summons to see her soon. James Potter was indeed different. The moment Rufus opened the door, he was on his feet, obviously trying to look more deferential than pathetically eager. Rufus raised an eyebrow and shut the door, leaning against it. He had not been here since the night he escorted Harry. In retrospect, that had been a bad idea, though he had literally thought the boy would not sleep if he did not see his father.

Let us see what he can say to make up for his words then.

"I'm so sorry," James began earnestly. "I'd like to make up for everything, if you'll only tell me how. I didn't really mean what I said to Harry that night. I was just caught up in the shock of losing everything that I thought I cared about. I woke up that morning planning to apply to get back into the Aurors again, and then—well, then I'd lost the chance." He gave a shrill, false laugh. "But now I know it wasn't Harry's fault that this happened when it did. Please, sir, will you deliver a letter to him? I have it right here." He held up an envelope.

"Impossible, sir," said Rufus evenly, and concealed the furious fire of his own scorn behind the tidy words. "Your trial is set for the sixteenth of November. You will be tried with your wife only, Albus Dumbledore

at a later date. Until then, you will have the best care we can provide you, a clean room and regular meals. It was discovered that your latest guard is not suitable for a variety of reasons, and another Auror will be taking over the post. Perhaps Auror Belladonna—“

“You don’t understand,” James interrupted. “You really don’t. I’ve changed my mind. I’ve repented what I said to Harry that night. That means that I don’t have to be tried.”

Rufus felt his eyebrows rise. He really should just leave now, since he knew the explanation would be rambling and pathetic, but he had to admit to some prurient curiosity of his own. Since he refused to indulge that curiosity by reading the wilder newspaper stories, it mostly gnawed at him, unsatisfied.

He might as well gratify the prisoner by listening to the confession he wanted to make, he thought. If nothing else, it would add something to his own personal collection of excuses that criminals made to explain why they shouldn’t suffer the full weight of the law. The weakest one so far came from a murderer who’d insisted that his victim told him she wanted to be murdered, conveniently alone and conveniently in just the manner he’d decided to do it.

This one promised to top that.

“Very well,” he said. “Tell me why.”

James openly sagged in relief, but then recovered himself and smiled. Rufus studied his face critically. Even if the man hadn’t been guilty of neglect, he thought, he wouldn’t have hired him. James’s face was just a little too desperate, a little too eager. He looked as though he needed the approval of others to survive. An Auror couldn’t be like that. He had to do many unpopular and unpleasant things, and glory was long in coming and fleeting when it arrived.

“I don’t know how much of Harry’s childhood you know about,” James began, and then paused and studied Rufus.

"I've viewed the memories that Severus Snape sent in a Pensieve," said Rufus. "I've also read long letters from him in which he testified to such crimes as your ignoring your wife's treatment of your son."

"I honestly didn't notice," said James, with a sheepish smile obviously meant to coax the person who saw it into agreeing with him. "I knew that Connor was all right, and I loved my little boy, and he was the Boy-Who-Lived. Is it any wonder that Harry fell into his shadow?"

"There is a long distance between favoring one child," Rufus noted, "and so neglecting the other that you never notice when your wife is training him to do without touch, in fact to shiver underneath it when someone does touch him."

James blinked, obviously disconcerted, and then came back to his point. "But Lily hid it well, with Albus's help. You must admit that. Do you think you would really have noticed anything else than what I did in my situation?"

"Yes."

James shook his head and threw up his hands. "You don't understand, obviously, since you're not me. The point is that I didn't notice. I always found another explanation when I thought I did see something strange. And that's not my fault, is it, for not being observant enough? I thought Harry was just a strange little kid who liked books too much. I didn't like books, so I shrugged and thought he would be in Ravenclaw when he went to Hogwarts. Of course I spent more time with the son who was more like me."

Rufus watched him in silence.

"And then I found out what Lily and Albus had done, via a magical artifact in my home, and I was horrified." James nodded seriously. "I quite naturally tried to get my son back. But Snape kidnapped him, and Harry never wrote to me, one way or the other, to say how he was. Then, when I tried to get my son back from him...well, you know what happened. I never meant to neglect him. I was always trying to do what was best for him. But other people—Snape, Connor, even

Harry himself—didn't notice, just like I didn't notice what Lily and Albus were doing to him at first." James gave Rufus a pleading look. "You don't try people for ignorance, do you?"

"No," said Rufus, when he thought he could trust himself to keep his voice steady. "But we do try them for stupidity. And I would say, Mr. Potter, since many people have made valiant attempts to cure your ignorance, that what you have is a case of stupidity instead."

James flushed darkly. "You're so against abuse, Mr. Scrimgeour, and yet you apply verbal abuse to prisoners?" he challenged.

"My proper title is Minister," said Rufus, standing straighter. "And if you think that is verbal abuse, Mr. Potter, it is little wonder that you never noticed what your son was suffering." He turned to the door.

"You'll speak to Harry?" James asked his back anxiously.

Rufus turned around reluctantly again. He didn't want to give this spineless coward the time of day. He knew James Potter, now. The man bent with the strongest following wind. Let that wind seem to shift towards his wife and Albus Dumbledore again, and he would bow to them and be just as strongly insisting that Harry's neglect and abuse had been for the general good, even as they did.

But if James was actually willing to testify against his wife and Dumbledore, then Rufus had to use him.

"Will you speak for the prosecution in the trial?" he asked James quietly.

James's face turned the color of wet ashes. "I explain this in the letter," he said, waving the envelope. "I can't do that. Of course I can't. How could I turn against my wife and my mentor? I just want to get clear of this altogether. I barely saw anything of Harry's childhood. How could I testify to what you say they've done unless I saw the evidence? And that would prejudice me."

Rufus sneered lightly. In their own way, Lily and Dumbledore are better than this man. They at least have the conviction that they were

doing right, and I know they'll testify that way, too. "And what do you expect Harry to do?"

"Forgive me," said James at once. "Drop the charges. If he decides that he wants to someday, come and live with me. I know that his mind's been poisoned by Lily and Dumbledore and Snape right now, but when it's clear again, then he should be able to see that I've never meant him anything but good."

Rufus had to close his eyes to keep himself from vomiting. "Your request is denied," he said. "Child abusers are never allowed to communicate with their victims."

"You brought Harry here that first night." There came a rustle that was probably James folding his arms. "So obviously you can bend the rules a bit. And I want Harry to see the letter. He would know how to forgive me."

"He would," said Rufus. "Because he's been taught how to forgive beyond all rational boundaries."

"Surely he's the only one who can make that decision." James obviously thought he had a point. "You can't make the choices for him."

Rufus opened his eyes and smiled slightly at James. "Actually, Mr. Potter, as he is not yet fifteen, yes, adults can make those decisions for him. And right now, his legal guardian is Severus Snape, who has threatened me with death if a letter from you ever comes into Harry's hands."

"He threatened you with death!" James pounced on that. "How can you trust him?"

Rufus opened the door, stepped out, and shut it behind him. He knew he was smiling with contempt, but he could not stop it. Oh, yes, he understood exactly what sort of man James Potter was. And he would give a great deal to make sure that Harry never came into contact with him again, after the trial.

He nearly bumped into a young witch hurrying along the hall, her head bowed and sobs breaking from her hands. He jumped, she jumped, and she backed away from him, staring at him in awe.

“You’re Minister Scrimgeour, aren’t you?” she asked, her already pink cheeks flushing pinker, as if he were there to judge the tears pouring down her face.

Rufus nodded, examining her closely. He thought the witch was familiar, but he couldn’t remember why. “And what’s your name?”

“H—Hestia Jones, sir.” The witch hid her face in her hands again. “I applied to be an Auror at one point,” she said, with a low wail. “And then I found out my brother had been arrested for smuggling flying carpets into Britain, and I decided that I had to drop out of the Auror program. How could I stand the shame of it?”

Rufus nodded. He did know where he’d seen her, now: in the newest class of trainee Aurors. Of course, her cheeks had been flushed with pride then.

“I understand if you wanted to take some time off, Madam Jones,” he said. “I do hope that we can count on seeing you in the Auror program again. Someone with an innate sense of justice as strong as yours is always needed.”

Hestia looked shyly up at him. “Thank you, sir. That’s very kind of you to say.” She cast a Tempus charm, and then jumped at the numbers that appeared. “I’ve got to go,” she muttered. “Thank you again, sir!” she called, as she rushed away.

Rufus shook his head and walked towards his office with a curiously lighter heart, ready to assign Percy Weasley to his newest duties and owl St. Mungo’s. Sometimes it helped to be reminded that ordinary life went on all around him, never mind the arrest of criminals for child abuse charges and the danger of living in a world with a resurrected Dark Lord and a child with Lord-level power and mental scars.

Hestia paused a moment to make sure the Minister was gone, then crept towards the door of the proper cell. She’d got the information through a hastily penned note, not even delivered by owl, but by

falcon. She whispered the incantations that would unlock the wards, and then drew out the copy of the key she'd had made. Sometimes, having criminal relatives could come in useful.

She opened the door, and stepped into the room that held the helplessly frozen form of her leader, Albus Dumbledore.

Hestia swallowed as she hurried to draw forth the glowseeds that would counteract the Still-Beetle shell. It hurt to see him like that. She'd just joined the Order of the Phoenix a few months ago, but she'd heard tales of Albus Dumbledore, the White Wizard and Lord of Light, all her life from her witch mother. He shouldn't be standing rooted to the floor with an expression of vague surprise on his face, all his magic and all his goodwill locked away.

She pressed the glowseeds against his neck and whispered the proper incantation. Red light spread up and down his body, softening his stern outline. In a moment, Dumbledore sagged and nearly fell. Hestia took his arm and held him upright. Her heart still ached with pity, but she felt proud that she had been the one trusted to come to him in a moment of weakness like this.

Dumbledore spent several moments breathing in silence, then lifted his face and smiled at her. Hestia ducked her head, her cheeks flaring again.

"My dear," said Dumbledore gently, "thank you. But before you go away again, you must press the Still-Beetle shell in your pocket against me, and freeze me once more."

Hestia blinked. It was true that the note had said she should bring a Still-Beetle shell with her, but she had assumed that it was for the enemies who might get in their way as she rescued the Headmaster. This was so exciting. She had envisioned daring escapes. She hadn't envisioned Dumbledore staying here. "Headmaster—" she began.

Dumbledore shook his head. "I hold that position no longer, Hestia, so it is inappropriate to address me by its title," he chided her gently.

Hestia nodded. "Sorry, my lord. It's just so unfair."

Dumbledore sighed. "Yes, it is. With Voldemort returned—" he waited kindly for her to finish flinching at the name "—the wizarding world needs me more than ever. But there are many people who would hesitate to trust me now, given that the charges of child abuse are still so fresh in so many minds, and if I escaped, it would only confirm for them that I was guilty. Even the Order is divided against me. So I must needs ask that you leave me here, frozen again, so that our enemies suspect nothing."

"Then why free you in the first place?" Hestia whispered. I wanted to help. Have I really done that?

"Because the Still-Beetle shell caged all of my magic," said Dumbledore. "Free from it, I can release some of my power." He closed his eyes, and the air around both him and Hestia grew warmer. Hestia shivered in wonder. It felt as though it had been winter in the room before, and now she stood on the edge of spring.

"What are you going to do, my lord?" she whispered.

"Change some minds," said Dumbledore, in a stronger voice than he had so far spoken in. "It is an old spell, one rarely used, because there are so many would use it for wrong purposes, and it is tied to distant events rather than taking place at once. But it is the perfect spell for this circumstance." He paused, then murmured, "Converto intellegentiam de Harry Potter! Converto animadversionem ab intellegentia!"

Hestia felt the spell move outward, a thick, clinging cloud that dissipated as it touched the walls of the room. Dumbledore let out a long sigh, and seemed to age before her eyes. He smiled tiredly at her.

"Now, my dear, if you will touch me with the Still-Beetle shell again, you should go. They will visit me before long. They always do. They do not trust me."

“Don’t you want something to eat before I go, sir?” Hestia asked plaintively. “To drink?” She had dreamed of helping her hero more than it seemed she would be able to.

Dumbledore patted her cheek. “They would notice, my dear, when they undid the confinement before my trial, if I had unusual food stains on my teeth. Even this release is a risk, but as long as I change nothing about my body itself, then they are unlikely to notice.” He arranged himself in the frozen posture he’d used before, put on the same expression of vague confusion, and waited expectantly for her.

Hestia, catching her lip between her teeth before she could speak another protest, used the Still-Beetle shell on him, and watched as her leader once more froze. She sighed and slipped out of the room, hands clenching as she went.

Albus Dumbledore was still the leader of the wizarding world to those who mattered, even now the Lord of Light. He would save them. Hestia knew it. But she also knew that he was wiser than she was. If he said events had to fall out this way, then they had to fall out this way.

But she wished, more than anything else, that the charges had never been filed, that no one had ever been allowed to look at Dumbledore’s sacrifices to keep the wizarding world safe with scorn instead of awe.

Grimly, she turned and began doing up the locking wards on the door again; the note had included instructions on that, from someone who was too notorious to get back into the Ministry without being noticed. He had had injustice done to him, too. That was all right, though, Hestia told herself as she worked. Eventually justice would be done, and just as Albus Dumbledore would lead the wizarding world again, Kingsley Shacklebolt would be part of the Aurors once more.

Chapter Nine: Gryffindor's Shame

Minerva mopped at her eyes. They were watering badly, a combination of the poor light around her and the long day she'd had. Once again, she suffered the temptation to go back to the Headmaster's office—her office, now, though she still hadn't got used to that—and curl up to get some sleep. Merlin knew she had plenty of her own affairs to occupy her aboveground. There were the teachers to reassure, the Transfiguration courses to arrange, candidates for the various positions held open for her to interview, the papers to placate...

But none of that was as urgent as the work that had brought her down here, she reminded herself, and so she straightened her shoulders and plowed forward. The plop of water echoed in the distance. Minerva tried to imagine exactly where she was in relation to the castle above her, and could not.

She walked a long, sloping tunnel that sometimes stayed level but mostly led irresistibly down and down. It had begun behind a door in the Headmaster's office. Minerva didn't recognize it, didn't remember ever hearing Albus speak of it, and had immediately become suspicious. The first thing she concluded was that it led to more of the Headmaster's mischief. And then she had, on first stepping into it, felt the tingle of wards around her.

The wards weren't the same as they should have been, though. They were tangled, tattered, broken. They didn't reach out to her, but tried to lash and score her face, at least until Minerva drew out the silver Headmistress's badge she'd taken to wearing at her throat. Then they subsided and lay around her with a snarl.

Minerva immediately began following the tunnel.

She paused to lick her dry lips and readjust her grip on her wand. She hadn't cast a Lumos spell, since that could dangerously reveal her position to an enemy, but a ball of light that bobbed several feet ahead of her. As always, Minerva studied the floor for a sign of holes or weakening.

She'd just started to move forward when she stopped, nose twitching. Sometimes, when she concentrated, she could use a cat's heightened senses even in human form, and her nose was telling her there was something in front of her now.

Devil's Snare, she thought, and waved her wand. "Finite Incantatem!"

That caught her ball of light, dispelling it, but should also have taken care of the glamour that covered the plant. As Minerva conjured more light, she nodded in grim recognition of the mass of green tendrils, which swayed towards her as though starved.

Albus put this here to ensnare anyone who dared walk the path. Now I am more certain than ever that he did something wrong down here, and wanted no one else to know about it.

"Incendio!" Minerva said, and the flames ripped into the Devil's Snare, which coiled hastily away, leaving her a clear path through. Minerva edged down the path, and halted on the other side with a little laugh. Impossible as it seemed when the Headmaster had been arrested for child abuse and he had left Merlin-knew-what troubles around for her to fix, she felt younger than she had in ten years.

At least something like this requires skills I know I have, she thought, as she marched forward. Not trying to think of what people want me to say other than the truth. That had been the most frustrating part of dealing with the newspaper reporters, as they continually begged her to give them details about the child abuse that did not actually exist.

Or details that Minerva had no intention of releasing. Harry's pale face flashed before her eyes most of the time now, and so did Severus Snape's almost equally haggard one. Even knowing he had sent an incredibly naked account to the Ministry, Minerva saw no need to imitate him. Honeywhistle and the rest could find the grist for their evil mills elsewhere.

The tunnel curved around a large pillar. Minerva floated her ball of light out of the way this time, and once again cast Finite at the carved stone. It shuddered, and flickered, and then several deep blue lights came into being on it.

Minerva studied them from a safe distance, frowning. Most spells that produced blue light were pale blue, for no reasons Minerva knew (the Color Theorists at St. Mungo's were apt to babble on for hours about them, but Minerva had never listened). This was a deep, glinting blue, rather like the cobalt cups that Minerva's mother had used at the table when she was a girl.

She took one step nearer, and then another, defensive spells poised on the tip of her tongue.

Nothing happened until she got nearer the pillar, and then it was only a slight gasp and a widening of her eyes. She could see, now, that wards or spells clinging about the pillar did not cast the blue light. Instead, it came from several triangular stones, each as large as a fist, buried deeply in the pillar itself.

Minerva knew the stones by sight, but only from the pages of books. She had never assumed that she would have a chance to see them face-to... well, rock. Supposedly, they were so valuable that wizarding society had used them up long ago.

And, somehow, she had never thought that she would be seeing them face-to-rock after the Headmaster had been accused of child abuse, though if there was one place the rocks might still be in use, it was Hogwarts.

Minerva counted the stones now, silently, walking around the pillar a few times to be sure that she had them all. Yes. For all their brilliance, there were only four of them. One was carved with an open book, one a narrow design that looked like a valley cut between mountains, and the one lowest down on the pillar showed a strange device, somewhere between a wand and a sword.

The one nearest the top showed a sleeping cat.

Minerva swallowed. Granted, she was taking a risk, and she didn't know if the instinctive associations she had given the gems would help.

But she was a Gryffindor, and she was Headmistress, and she was desperate to protect her school and make up for the shame of her House that Albus had incurred on it.

She reached up and pressed her palm to the stone carved with the cat.

There came a long, deep moan, a rushing wind that gathered up speed and music as it swept along. Minerva stood still as the wind wrapped around her body, chilling her skin, sinking under her clothes. Then the pillar and the tunnel began to move, a circling, stately dance as proud as a snake's.

Minerva went along for the ride, telling herself that she was a Gryffindor, and Gryffindors were not made afraid as easily as all that.

Pressing into her mind, though, was the reminder that she hadn't told anyone where she was going, exactly the kind of carelessness she would have scolded one of her students for.

The dance stopped at last, and Minerva opened her eyes. She was not surprised to find herself in a different place entirely. No one had ever said that anchor-stones were ordinary, and one of their properties was bringing the living person in the web into contact with the dead.

Minerva stepped back, able to remove her hand from the cat's stone only now. She looked around, wondering who would meet her. She had a good idea of whom the other anchor-stones indicated, but any of them might choose to respond.

Or no one, she reminded herself. In that case, she was certain she could touch the cat's stone and transport herself back through the pillar.

Well, fairly certain, at least.

A golden light burst into being in front of her, illuminating the round, bare cavern. Well, it would have been bare to most people in Hogwarts. Now that she was Headmistress, Minerva could see all the

wards, even the ones that had been slow or reluctant to respond to her so far. And this room was covered with them, blending into messy knots from which still more lines of wards led forth.

This was the anchor in more than one way, Minerva realized then. This was the room where the wards all came together, forming Hogwarts's base, the web of webs.

The golden light was separate from the wards, though. It rolled together like the ball of flame a phoenix created in appearing, and then solidified and shimmered, bright as molten metal. Minerva had to shield her eyes until the light abruptly dimmed, and an anxious, male voice said, "Oh, dear. I see that matters have changed from the last time I was here."

Minerva looked up. In front of her stood an older wizard, though his white beard still bore a trace of gold. His robes were golden and red, and worked down their seams with the same wand-and-sword design as one of the anchor-stones. He had green eyes worn by the years, but they stared at her with strong, clear intelligence.

"Godric Gryffindor," she said, because she needed the reassurance, even though she knew it must be.

He nodded. "Or a part of him," he said. "I trust that you understand how anchor-stones work?"

"This is a ghost or a dream of you," said Minerva, with a wave of her hand. "A—a record, of you as you were at a certain point in your life. Left to guard the school and to help the Headmasters of Hogwarts." She was astonishing herself with her own calm speech. Well, perhaps it was to be expected. She had gone a little beyond shock when the wards tried to attack her.

Godric nodded. "The others who remain with you, as you probably surmised, are Helga and Rowena." A flash of anger crossed his face. "Salazar was still here when we bound some of our spirits to protect the school, but he wouldn't agree to do it. Something about never leaving part of himself behind, lest an enemy could get hold of it."

Godric shrugged. "But Salazar was always paranoid. You're new, Headmistress. I think your name is—"

"Minerva McGonagall." Minerva lifted her head proudly.

"Ah." Godric nodded. "I remember a Headmaster McGonagall, about the middle of the sixteenth century. A good man."

"One of my ancestors," Minerva acknowledged. "I need to know how much you know about the recent power transfer between Albus Dumbledore and myself, sir. I found one of the anchor-stones carved with a cat, but—"

"We're only magical constructs, really," Godric interrupted. "The school takes care of transforming the stones when it accepts a new Headmaster or Headmistress. No, I don't know much, but your appearing so suddenly like this, and not being prepared to find us, isn't a good sign. Usually, the Headmaster comes with his successor and shows him or her all the secrets of Hogwarts's tunnels at one time. What happened to Albus Dumbledore?"

Minerva sighed and bowed her head. This would take some explaining.

As quietly as she could, she narrated the plan of sacrifice she now understood Albus to have been pursuing, and why he had pursued it. She made sure to mention how Gryffindor Albus had been, and how he found a Lord-level child in Slytherin an impossible concept to come to terms with, assuming that the child would of course become another Dark Lord. She explained the abuse he had inflicted—as much as she understood; she had not yet forced herself all the way through Severus's records—and why she had come rather abruptly into her own office.

Godric was silent when she was done, though Minerva could not tell what he was thinking, since he had turned his back on her. He walked over to the far side of the cavern, and then abruptly swore and lashed out with one foot. It sank into the wall. Minerva winced as she might have if he had actually contacted something and bruised his skin. I hope that I never have to bind part of myself to an anchor-

stone. It must be frustrating to want to rage, and not be able to hit anything.

Godric turned back around, his green eyes absolutely burning with fury. "He was Gryffindor," he said.

Minerva simply nodded, deciding that Godric would probably come to the same conclusions she had.

"He was Gryffindor, and he did this," Godric went on, his voice rising. He stalked back and forth. Minerva studied his boots, and saw that they skimmed the floor, but she no longer thought he was solid. More likely, it was just conscious practice that kept them there, since Godric was a different kind of ghost. "What kind of shame has he brought down on our House? How are we going to recover our reputation, teach the others to trust us again?" He looked at her. "You're Gryffindor, aren't you? Most of the McGonagalls have been."

Minerva nodded again.

"They're going to distrust Gryffindors as they once distrusted Slytherins," Godric whispered, and then laughed harshly. "What kind of world is it where someone who follows my principles abuses children and someone who follows Salazar's principles is only interested in freedom?"

"One I need your help to navigate," said Minerva, seizing what she felt was her best chance. "I know that something is still wrong with the wards; they did not transfer to me as smoothly as they should have when Albus was taken out of power. Can you guide me to the place where the tangling originates from?" She took one more look around the cavern. "All of them here seem neat and smoothly braided."

Godric stilled for a moment. Then he said, "Of course I will. It is partly my doing that this happened, after all." He turned towards a corner of the cavern, beckoning for her to follow him.

"Partly your doing?" Minerva frowned as she walked, paying as much attention to the walls as to what she was saying. There seemed to be no door or any evidence of entrance elsewhere than the pillar. She

hoped it wasn't a door that ghosts could get through, but which she was condemned to linger behind. "I don't think it is. I want to recover the reputation of Gryffindor as much as you do, but you aren't responsible for the behavior of everyone in your House."

"I am for this," said Godric softly. "Some years ago, the Headmaster came to me, and said that he needed to alter the defenses of the school in order to protect the students better. I accepted that, of course, and showed him how to do it. Now I worry that I gave him the key to a door I should never have opened." He gestured, and the stone in front of them vanished.

Minerva stared. What appeared to be a sheer staircase of white stone soared upward before her, gleaming in the fall of a shaft of sunlight from somewhere high above. Diamond dust, or particles of what looked like it, circled in the air. Minerva shook her head and looked at Godric. "I don't understand. Are we outside?"

"Not exactly," said Godric, and indicated another anchor-stone embedded in the rock at the foot of the staircase, so deeply that Minerva had not even noticed its deep blue glow next to the steps themselves. "Just as you can bind a dead wizard's essence to one of these stones, you can bind the essence of a dead place. Create nearly inaccessible boltholes, because, after all, you're escaping into the past—but it's a past cut off from everyone else, so that you don't need to chance meeting yourself like you do with a Time-Turner." He held his hand out to Minerva, who hesitantly laid her palm in it, and found to her shock that his fingers were solid. "This was once part of the home where I was born," he added simply. "I showed it to Albus because no one could get into it unless I was holding their hand. I couldn't think of a better place for the altered defenses of the school to rest."

Minerva took the first step up the staircase. It trembled at her weight, and then emitted a shining, shrill note. Minerva trembled back, and shook her head as they climbed higher and higher into the shaft of sun. This was like a dream of Light, and she could not imagine what the home beyond the staircase would look like.

It was as marvelous as she'd hoped. They were still indoors, she saw when the staircase played out, but the house was made of the same white stone as the steps themselves, polished planes that captured light and then breathed it back out in softened but still dazzling bursts. Minerva found herself standing on a broad floor of flat flags, with a gleam of green and gold through distant windows. The green was not the deep, poisonous color of Slytherin, but the fierce color of living trees. The air around her breathed warmth like the height of summer. Minerva could see other pillars and intricate, shining silver and white artifacts sitting tamely on the floor, just waiting for someone to pick them up and use them to create beautiful things.

"This way," Godric murmured, and swept on across the floor, in the direction of one of the pillars. Minerva followed, still looking around in wonder. This was one of those wizarding places she had dreamed about, she thought, the ones from the days of wild magic and fey tales. Then, the Light had been the minority faction, with more wizards holding allegiance to the wild Dark magic that danced on Walpurgis Night. Midsummer rituals were small and sacred but intense, things of great power, and Light wizards created their homes as bastions of civilization, dedicated to the careful keeping and preserving of valuable artifacts and books—not things to be destroyed as many Dark artifacts were, the moment their owners lost interest in them.

The Light can hurt others—Albus has proven that—but it can also create and hold beauty, Minerva thought proudly.

She heard a distant chime, like angry music, and frowned. Before she could ask Godric about it, he said, "Ah. Here," and stepped aside from one of the pillars in particular.

Minerva blinked. It wasn't a pillar at all, as she had first assumed from its upright position in a corner of the room, but a statue of Albus. He looked as he had when he strode across battlefields to fight Voldemort, clad in white robes and Light. He had a hand held up as though to calm an excited crowd, and his eyes, made of blue stones that Minerva didn't think were sapphires, gleamed with wisdom and intelligence.

And all about him curled the wards of Hogwarts, diving into his body at various points and then sliding outward again, as though he were a fly caught in the midst of a spider's web. Minerva thought he was more likely to be the spider in this particular web than the prey, though.

"He made himself necessary to them," said Godric quietly. "That's why the wards are attacking you. He made it so that no other Headmaster would be able to take his place in Hogwarts unless he approved them and was willing to transfer the control of the wards to them. There are enormous holes in the defenses right now because he's not there. And it's only going to get worse."

Minerva closed her eyes. Even with everything she already knew about Albus, how far he had fallen from the ideals she had once believed him to hold, this hurt. She could believe better that he had a particular enmity for Slytherin children with Lord-level power than she could believe that he would want his other students to suffer if something happened to him.

"Why does the school recognize me at all?" she asked.

"Because he did not bind all the wards," said Godric. "I think, now, that he didn't ask for that because I would have got curious and asked too many questions back. He left enough free to convince you, or anyone else who followed him, that you had complete control of Hogwarts. But it's not true. The deeper defenses are decaying. He planned it so that would happen if he were killed or removed from power."

Minerva shook her head. "And if he'd died of old age?"

"Then I believe the wards would have transferred smoothly, because that's a natural death." She looked at Godric to see him shrugging. "What he didn't want was anyone to have the same amount of power he did, and to make Hogwarts utterly dependent on him. He believed that he was the best one to protect it." A flash of bitterness darted across the Founder's face. "He told me that, when I helped him create this statue. I didn't listen to where he put the emphases of his words, or I might have known something was off."

He took a deep breath, tugged on his beard, and then met her eyes. "You're the rightful successor to Albus Dumbledore, and more than that, I think you're someone who will try to set this to rights. 'Go to a McGonagall if you want bloody-minded stubbornness,'" he said, as though quoting someone. Before Minerva could insist that he tell her who had said that, Godric continued, "And I want to help restore the reputation of the school, and of my House, and of the Light. I'd even like to help this young Lord you describe, if only to make up for the wrong Albus did him." He paused, his hands tapping at nothing, and then said, "This is going to sound like an odd question, but I can't keep myself from asking it. Call me a foolish optimist."

"I would never call you foolish, sir," said Minerva, with a faint smile, and waited.

Godric cleared his throat. "Has this boy—Harry, you said that was his name—spoken at all about being vates? Freeing the magical creatures, and trying to foresee paths by which they can live in peace with wizards and witches?"

Minerva stared at him.

"I told you it was an odd question," said Godric defensively.

"I—that is, yes, he has." Minerva shook her head. "I didn't know that anyone else would think anything of it, so I didn't mention it in my recitation to you."

Godric nodded. "Then I am more determined than ever to help him," he said. "In one way, and one way alone, I think Albus was right to be wary of the boy. Lords do change the world, and they can do it without regard for the people around them. Albus was like that himself. But if this Harry Potter is thinking of others...then I want to help." He sighed, staring into the middle distance. "My dearest ambition, at one point, was to be a vates. But I couldn't. I wasn't strong enough. I managed to achieve some remarkable things with dear Helga and Rowena, and even Salazar, when he was still with us, but that was always in cooperation. And none of the others quite agreed with me about freeing the magical creatures, or which ones

should be freed.” He glanced at Minerva. “And now—do you think Potter will pause until all the magical creatures are freed?”

“Not unless some of them tell him that they want to remain slaves,” said Minerva, thinking of the way the Many snakes had come into Hogwarts’ Great Hall the day of the spring equinox. “He has freed Dementors that I know of, and a breed of snakes called the Many, and even the unicorns.” She had been able to feel the absence of the unicorns the moment she ascended into her position as Headmistress, though it had taken her a few days to figure out what it was.

Godric clenched his hands in front of him. “Then I am glad that you came and found me,” he said fiercely. “Albus has brought shame upon our House, but we have a chance to reverse it, and in the best way, by helping someone truly worthy of help.”

Minerva eyed the statue. “And what do we do about this? Can I simply transfer the wards to myself?”

Godric sighed, deflating again. “No. I’m afraid not. Some of the spells that surround and protect this statue are ones that only Albus can undo. Besides, we don’t want you to be central to the wards in the way that he was. What if you fall in battle? That leaves Hogwarts unprotected again.”

Minerva nodded. “And, as of yet, I do not have a Deputy Headmaster picked out.” She knew whom she was going to ask, but delicacy required that she wait a little while. “Very well. Then what would you suggest we do?”

“Coax the school.”

Minerva frowned at him.

Godric flushed a bit. “Ah. Excuse me. That would be Helga’s term for it. She believed that Hogwarts was a living thing. That was one reason she never agreed with me about trying to act as a cooperative vates. She was more interested in magical plants and buildings than magical creatures. She meant that you have to coax Hogwarts to

trust you as you would any wild thing. It's been hurt by its Headmaster. It needs to see that you care."

"And?" Minerva prompted. "How do I do that?" She couldn't help thinking that Godric Gryffindor would have been an irritating professor. Students wanted to know things, learn them, or at least the best of them, like Hermione Granger, did. They didn't want endless digressions around the subject of their interest.

Godric blinked at her, then flushed more deeply. "Ah. Excuse me," he repeated. "Talk to the wards. Walk through the tunnels. Get to know them. Think often and forcefully of what you plan to do. Show the school that you don't blame it. Don't resist any wards that come and attach themselves to you. Find specific holes and repair them." He nodded. "That will do for a start. Meanwhile, I'll work on removing the protections I put on this blasted statue. It should start decaying naturally, until it reaches the point where only Albus's power is sustaining it. Then we'll call on Helga and Rowena. They're watching right now, you know."

He chuckled as Minerva glanced suspiciously around the house. "They're less proactive than I am, and they attend other aspects of Hogwarts than the wards," he explained. "Plus, you're not one of theirs. They'll approach when they feel the time is right. Show them you can be trusted, Minerva, and I have no doubts that they'll eventually warm up to you. They need to be coaxed like wild creatures, too," he added, raising his voice.

A book materialized over his head and fell towards him. Godric dodged it, laughing.

Minerva shook her head. "You're more informal than I thought you would be," she observed, unable to stop herself.

"I've been modified by contact with the Headmasters and Headmistresses over the centuries, of course," said Godric mildly. His face darkened for a moment. "Even Albus taught me much," he muttered. Then he recovered his poise. "I'm looking forward to what you can teach me." He held out a hand. "Come. I'll take you back to the entrance where the anchor-stones are."

Minerva sat up primly when the visitor she'd expected knocked on her door. She'd had a few hours to get over meeting one of the Four Founders of Hogwarts, and to reconcile herself to the extent of Albus's treachery and betrayal, the evidence that he really had trusted no one but himself to do even basic things like protecting the school. The one she faced now had his own griefs to bear, though she intended to distract him in part by asking him to take up extra duties. She would be calm and kind and implacable.

"Come in," she called.

Severus entered and took the chair opposite her, looking more than ever like a bird of ill omen. Minerva had learned to look past the menacing exterior the first year he taught at Hogwarts, though. She stared into his face, and saw the slightly sunken state of his eyes and cheeks, the way he glared at the desk and not at her, and the tight press of his teeth behind his lips.

Losing Harry like this has been harder than he would admit to himself. Minerva knew he had received a letter from Harry the other day, and had written back, but Harry was evidently unwilling as yet to come to Hogwarts and trust himself to Severus's guardianship. That would tell on him. Minerva was sure that he loved the boy like a son, for all that Severus would deny it furiously if asked.

That is one way it's better to be a Gryffindor, she thought. We can tell the truth straight out, without all of this Slytherin lying and dodging, and then we don't look foolish when we're caught in a lie.

"Severus," she said. "I asked you here to become my Deputy Headmaster."

Severus jolted, and then stared at her. Minerva stared back at him.

"I always suspected that it was the office itself that caused Albus to go mad," he said at last, his voice grating and rasping. "Now I have proof. You are mad, Minerva. You cannot mean this."

“Yes, I do,” said Minerva. And not only because it will force you to think about other things than Harry, which Merlin knows you need. “I know what you’ve given up, Severus. Do you know what that says to me?”

“That I am an idiot?” Severus was back to glaring at the desk. “That I should never think of ever having a child, when they would act like this?”

“That you are determined to do the right thing before all else,” said Minerva, choking her own impulse to snap at Severus for his self-pity. She would have done it without hesitation when they were colleagues, but she had some authority over him now, and she had to use it properly. “And that indicates a man I could trust to become Headmaster, if I died or was forced to retire. We have endured enough betrayals. I want you by my side, Severus, because I know that you will never stab me in the back.”

Severus stared at her. Minerva waited for some mocking remark about how she should never trust a Slytherin not to backstab.

Instead, he murmured, “What have you learned?”

Minerva told him, wondering if he realized that by hearing these secrets, he was essentially committing himself. Severus didn’t show any awareness of it, but, as his face grew steadily darker and his eyes glittered with anger, as he came more to life than he had since Albus was arrested, Minerva was sure that she had made the right decision. This was a man who valued the good more than his own life or his own pride.

“So you’ll take the position, then,” she said, as he got up.

Severus gave her a steady, unblinking stare. “You are right,” he said finally.

Minerva raised her eyebrows.

“I can believe that the Hat almost put you in Slytherin now,” said Severus, and swept out of the room, which was answer enough.

Minerva leaned back and smiled. She could enjoy the brief glow of pleasure over a victory before she tackled the next problem.

“Do you see? I told you that you would be a leader.”

Minerva whipped around. In the corner of her office, near the door that led into the lower levels of the castle, stood the same cloaked figure who had introduced herself as Acies once before. She still smelled of smoke and fire, but now also of something else, Minerva thought, working her nose. Life, and spring, and light.

“Who are you?” Minerva demanded, as she had before.

“Someone you’ll be seeing soon,” said Acies, in an infuriatingly calm tone. “And someone who has a message for you. Listen. This is what Professor Trelawney told Headmaster Dumbledore on a tower a few weeks ago.

“Three on three the old one coils,
Three in its times, three in its choices,
It bears his rivals to silence and stillness,
And the wild Darkness laughs, and the Light rejoices.

“Two on two the storms that are coming,
Two for the day, and two for the year,
The storm of darkness when no moon will shine,
And the storm of light that will blaze most fiercely here.

“One on one all the prophecies bear down,
One is their center, and one is their heart,
And from my mouth comes no Divination again
Except those prophecies in which he has a part.”

“And what does that mean?” Minerva demanded, though she was already trying to work it out. The thing that seemed clearest was that she could count on Sybill making more prophecies. She wrinkled her nose.

“I don’t know everything yet,” said Acies. “I thought you should know this.” This time, the shadow of enormous wings appeared to stretch around her before she vanished, and Minerva had a distinct impression of wild eyes staring at her.

Minerva sat back, and shook her head. She was weary already of prophecies and the notion of working with one of them, but she had a core of iron determination under the reluctance.

I will not mess this up as Albus messed his chance up.

Chapter Ten: Argutus

Harry was aware that Draco had been staring at him most of the day, but he'd been busy, first with Elfrida's meeting with him—and that had been odd, because she'd let him hold Marian again and then talk about how much sleep he was getting and whether his hand, which she knew was missing now, ever ached—and then with trying to decide how to reply to Snape's latest letter. Besides, the few times he'd stared inquiringly back, Draco had averted his face.

Now, though, it seemed that Draco had had enough. He burst out, "You don't have to be a hero about it, you know, Harry. You are allowed to ask."

"Ask about what?" Harry looked back up from Snape's letter. He'd finally decided how he had to respond, but that didn't mean the words would be easy to write. If Draco had something to say that would necessitate putting them off for a time, Harry was all for it.

"What we're doing." Draco waved a hand to indicate the whole of the Manor.

Harry had been vaguely aware that the house elves were preparing a long table in the house's main room for a celebration of some kind the next day, and he surmised they were also cooking and cleaning within an inch of their lives. He didn't know what to do about the Malfoy house elves yet, how far he dared to press Lucius about freeing them, and so he'd tried not to pay that much attention. "Yes?" he asked. "What kind of celebration are you having?"

Draco stared at him again. Harry shrugged. "What?" he asked, hearing his voice turn defensive, and picked up a quill. Magic kept the blank sheet of parchment pinned down to the desk in front of him, since his left wrist hurt when he ground it down too hard.

"It's your birthday tomorrow, you git!" Draco burst out.

Harry blinked, his mouth dropping open. He really had lost track of the days. It was easy to do, of course, when the days were an endless round of studying, punctuated now and then by a letter from

Snape or an argument with Draco or a visit from Elfrida. Now, though, he really wished he hadn't done that.

"Shit," he muttered. "I have to get something for Connor." He jumped to his feet and made for the door.

Draco managed to dart in front of him. Harry glared up at him. Draco had gone through what Harry sincerely hoped was the last of his growth spurt, and was currently a bit taller than he was. He used it to his advantage now, leaning down and glaring back into Harry's eyes. "And where do you think you're going?"

"Diagon Alley," said Harry in exasperation.

"By yourself?" Draco looked perfectly scandalized. "Of course not, Harry."

"It's still daylight." Harry turned to study the sun coming in through the library windows, just in case. If he'd lost track of the fact that he had to get a birthday gift for Connor, he might well have managed to lose track of what time it was. He nodded and glanced back triumphantly at Draco. "See? I'll ask your mum if she'll go with me." Privately, he thought this ridiculous. He could defend himself better than anyone else, and he would only put Narcissa's life in danger. But since he'd rebuilt his mind, he'd found it paid to humor the people who loved him like this.

"She's busy with the preparations for the party," said Draco.

"Why is there going to be a party?" Harry could hear his voice getting plaintive, but he thought it had a right to. Draco and the Malfoys had given him gifts for his birthday before, of course, but they'd never thrown him some kind of extravagant celebration. "There doesn't have to be."

"Because Mother wants to invite your allies," said Draco. "Even the new ones, the ones who might not have carried away a very good impression of you from last time. Give them a chance to see what you look like when you're strong, and to meet each other." He snorted. "I can't wait to see the expression on Edward Burke's face when he

sees that Tybalt Starrise's been invited. He thinks Light wizards have no place in a Dark wizards' gathering."

Harry frowned. "When are they coming?"

"Late morning, early afternoon." Draco seemed more relaxed now that he believed Harry had given up any intention of going to Diagon Alley. "Mother thinks a few of them will probably arrive before then, though, to talk to you as privately as they can."

"Then I have some time to go to Diagon Alley tomorrow morning and buy a gift for Connor," said Harry hopefully. "Maybe even take it to him myself—"

"Harry." Draco folded his arms. "You can make a gift for your brother. I've seen you do it before. And you're not going anywhere outside the wards."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "I still think Bellatrix being outside the wards that day is a coincidence, Draco. And she ran the moment she saw your mum, anyway." Narcissa had still managed to inflict a curse on Bellatrix that she had said, cheerfully, would feel like a living thing trying to claw its way out of her belly. Harry had found himself wincing and wondering if there should be a limit to the oath of vengeance Narcissa had sworn, but then he'd looked into her face and known better than to say that.

"I don't think it's a coincidence, Harry." Draco's voice was still light, but it had frosted over, and Harry knew he was going to lose this argument, unless he actually wanted to Apparate through the Manor's wards, find a gift, and then dare to come back and face Draco's and Narcissa's wrath. "Besides, the last owl you sent your brother came back dazed, remember? I don't think the wards they've got him under, wherever he is, will let one through this time, either."

Harry scowled. He didn't know where Connor had been moved after the battle at the Weasleys—Connor had said that he couldn't tell him, just in case the letter fell into the wrong hands—though his brother could send post to him. He'd said he was cheerful, that he hadn't been wounded in the battle, that he was glad Harry was safe, and

many other things Harry had found reassuring at the time. Now, though, he was longing to know exactly where those owls came from, and wishing he'd receive one tonight. Perhaps he could persuade it to stick around and take a present back.

"Why are you worrying so much about buying a gift for your brother?" Draco repeated, his voice gentle and coaxing.

"Because I don't have any ideas for making one." Harry turned to pace around the library, trying to run his left hand through his hair on instinct, and then snorting as the hair raked along his wrist instead of over his fingers. "It has to be perfect, Draco. I want it to say something about the last year, and who we are, and what we've done—"

"Hush, Harry." Draco had come up behind him and put his arms around him. Harry squirmed uncomfortably. Lately, Draco didn't do this when Harry needed comfort, but any old time he wanted to. "You'll think of something. I know you will. And if you can't give it to him until after the summer, then that's all right."

Harry started to say it wasn't all right, and then stopped, eyes widening slightly. For whatever reason, Draco's words had sparked an odd chain of thoughts in his mind. When the summer was over, they would go back to school, and thanks to the lack of a Triwizard Tournament this year, he and Connor would both be able to play Quidditch. In a moment, he'd thought of the perfect gift for his brother.

"Excuse me, Draco," he said, and elbowed gently at his arms. Draco let him go with an amused little snort.

"Had an idea, didn't you?"

Harry nodded distractedly and jogged to the other side of the library. The books he needed were on the top shelf, where he'd noted but not read them the first day he was here. Luckily, Narcissa's punishment on reading heavier books than ones of fey tales had expired; Harry had found it exquisitely frustrating while it lasted. He pulled out two of the weightier tomes and then curled up in a chair to read.

Draco watched Harry for a moment. He could feel his emotions, humming like a hive of bees, and also, if he really concentrated, his muscle movements, sometimes presaging what he would do next.

His gift continued to change, and Draco was not sure what he was going to do about it.

Or how he was going to tell Harry, for that matter.

Draco had opened his eyes a few days ago to find that he was opening his father's eyes, not his own. He'd lain still, caught between fear and curiosity at the feeling of limbs so much heavier than his, the sensation of long hair and sleeping robes instead of pyjamas, the soft sound of his mother's snoring in his ear.

He'd concentrated, and managed to hop back to his body. But then he'd lain awake and silent, still afraid.

He had known without having to think about it that he could have commanded his father to stand, stretch, yawn, scratch himself, speak words that were words of Draco's devising and not his own. It had felt even easier than with the Death Eater Draco had attacked. It was not compulsion, not the way that Harry had described his brother's ability to Draco. Compulsion functioned on the mind only, and could be resisted. This was the knowledge that Draco could manipulate other peoples' bodies like puppets to his will.

He could imagine how useful it would be in battle.

He could imagine how much Harry, with his love of free will, would hate it.

Draco shivered before the thought of telling him. It had to happen sometime, of course, even though Draco had never intruded into Harry's mind and never planned to without invitation. But every day that Draco could put it off, and had no more wandering incidents in the nighttime, was one more that he could bask in the glow of Harry's unrelieved regard, and know that Harry never suspected him of more than, in Harry's view, an odd desire to touch him too much.

Draco straightened his shoulders and took a deep breath. He had promised himself that he had changed, would change, and he knew that the kind of person he wanted to be would have told Harry as soon as the moment seemed right after the battle. Besides, the moment was coming when he would have to push Harry, gently, to get other things he wanted. Back down from that, and he would never have the equal footing in their bond that he so desperately yearned for.

A flutter of wings pulled his thoughts from their descending spiral. Draco turned, and watched two great horned owls swoop through the window. Suspended in a net between their claws was a large green box, bearing the coiled silver serpent that marked Coluber House.

Draco accepted the box, hearing the delicate press of scales as something slithered around inside, and paid the owls with some of the Sickles he'd been carrying in his robe pocket in anticipation of the delivery. They bobbed their heads at him and soared away.

"What have you got there?"

Draco cradled the box against his chest and didn't turn around, despite Harry's curious question. "A birthday gift for you," he said loftily. "You'd better not try to see what it is."

Harry laughed at him, though the sound had a tinge of sadness. "Draco, you don't need to buy anything that it takes two owls to deliver," he said. "But thank you. I won't try to see it, or guess."

Draco crept out of the library, casting several suspicious glances over his shoulder to keep the joke running, and then took the box to his room. One glimpse inside reassured him that the Omen snake looked the way he was supposed to look, compared to the pictures in the books Draco had studied. He dropped a few of the stunned crickets he'd also prepared into the box, and heard soft crunching a moment later.

Draco flopped back on his bed, then winced. Beds in Malfoy Manor were not really made for flopping on, however comfortable they were

for sleeping. He folded his hands behind his head and uttered a long, deep breath.

I'll wait to tell Harry about my ability. I think I have to. The gift I give him tomorrow is going to be hard enough for him to stomach.

Harry delicately wound a tendril of magic around his fingers and then stood back, nodding. The seven tiny Quidditch players he'd created, adapting a spell from one of the Quidditch books that teams used to predict strategy, zoomed around their artificial pitch, Transfigured from a piece of parchment. Harry grinned at them. They wore the robes of the Chudley Cannons right now, but they would change their colors depending on the team names that Connor spoke to them.

It was not, perhaps, the perfect gift, but it was one that would have meaning to Connor, and certainly did to Harry. Here's something that you enjoy, and which hasn't had a chance to be tainted by the last year. He might even write those words in the letter he hoped to send his brother, but probably not. He trusted Connor to understand his meaning.

He sighed and cast a glance at the clock above the mantelpiece in the library. It was already almost nine, and he didn't know how much longer he'd have before the guests started arriving. If it weren't for Narcissa and her punishments, he could have stayed up late last night and finished this, but Narcissa actually checked on Harry to be sure that he went to bed at the time she'd assigned him. Harry was disappointed in her. Yes, he had promised to obey the limits she set, and he was, but these were silly ones. His cheeks stung just thinking about them.

That's probably why she did it: to make you feel so humiliated that you won't think of running off again.

Harry huffed a breath, and then looked up hopefully as a house elf came in with a confused-looking owl perched on its arm. Sure enough, the owl had a small box hooked to its leg. Harry held out his own arm and whistled, and the owl launched itself to him, delivering the package and the letter to him with a solemn air.

“Wait a bit?” Harry asked, while smiling his thanks at the elf. “I have a package for you to take back, if you’re willing.”

The barn owl fixed him with wide golden eyes, as much to say that she couldn’t do that.

“I have a dead mouse here,” Harry added. And he did, lying beside him under a preservation spell. When he realized he might have to tempt the owl that came from Connor, he had thought he’d want to have the best temptation possible. “It’s yours if you take the package back.”

The owl swiveled her head, but at least she hadn’t refused outright. Carefully, Harry shrank the Quidditch player set and put it into its box before he opened the letter Connor had sent him.

To my brother Harry, happy birthday. Have some fun this year.

Love, Connor.

Curious, Harry opened the small box, and smiled at what lay inside, struggling furiously against its bonds. It was a Snitch, but slightly larger than normal, and as Harry watched, it flashed with various colors, then turned clear and almost vanished from his sight. Snitches like this were sometimes used to train serious Seekers, but mostly they were children’s toys, intended to amuse.

“It looks like we’re thinking along the same lines,” Harry muttered, and then set aside the Snitch to pick up the box containing the Quidditch player set. He eyed the owl coaxingly. “The mouse is yours, if you just take this back.”

The owl hopped in place. Harry grimaced a bit as she cut his arm and trails of blood started to flow from beneath her talons, but he kept his stare steady, and in a short time, she inclined her head and permitted him to tie his box and note to her leg. Then she stared imperiously at the mouse. Harry laughed, ended the preservation spell, and tossed it to her. She sat on his arm and happily fed until the mouse was gone, then turned and launched herself past the startled house elf, who chased her.

Harry turned around with a chuckle, just as the fire in the hearth flared green and Henrietta Bulstrode stepped through.

Harry lifted his eyebrows and studied her. Henrietta stared back for a moment, as though she hadn't expected to find him there. Then her mouth curved in a smile that couldn't fool him. Harry had seen eyes like hers before, in pictures of hunting great cats.

"Hello, Potter," said Henrietta. "Happy birthday." She placed a carefully wrapped box on the mantelpiece. "I trust that I find you well, though you seem to have deprived yourself of a hand since the last time I saw you."

Harry concealed a snort. Is that the best she can do? He hadn't worn the glamour of his left hand since returning from Godric's Hollow, and of course Elfrida and Adalrico had seen, along with Hawthorn, and the word had spread among the Dark purebloods. "Hello, Mrs. Bulstrode," he said, not even bothering to respond to her barb. "Many thanks for the birthday wishes. Did your daughter come with you?"

Henrietta twisted her head, rather like the owl. "She did not. But I will tell her that you asked after her. Many a young witch might be happy to hear that you were interested in her fate."

Harry concealed another laugh. Why is she being so obvious? Well, after all, I was weak the last time she saw me. That probably factors into it. "I wish her all the best, of course," he said. "I can imagine the sight that she'll make in a few years, when she's come into her power and her beauty." Henrietta's eyes brightened, which made it the perfect moment for Harry to add, "Of course, she would receive an invitation to my joining."

Henrietta blinked and stared at him. "Your joining?" she asked, and then obviously hated herself for ever saying something so inane.

Harry smiled at her. "You must have heard of that, too," he said. Patronizing, just the right among of patronizing in my voice—and oh, how her eyes flash! "That Draco Malfoy and I are most likely going to

be joined,” Harry clarified, and added a few more dollops of condescension into his voice for good measure.

There passed a few moments during which Henrietta simply breathed, and then she dropped a curtsy. “Let me be one of the first to wish you congratulations then, Mr. Potter,” she said.

“Oh, most people already have.” Harry wandered to the library door, smiling over his shoulder at her. “But I accept your good wishes just as I accept your birthday wishes. Come this way, please, and you can put your gift with the others. I’ll see that you receive some refreshment, too, Mrs. Bulstrode. Do you prefer wine? Perhaps not this early in the morning, hmm? Pumpkin juice might be better.”

He turned forward again, before his victorious grin could become visible. He still thought this whole extravagant birthday celebration was a ridiculous idea, and could not tell why the Malfoys had planned it—even as a convenient excuse to gather his allies, there was no reason it had to be so lavish—but he might as well use it to have fun with someone who thought his control of the alliance fragile. Henrietta stood where she was for a moment, eyes narrowed and focused on the door.

I acted stupid.

And it was my own fault.

Grimly, Henrietta ran the memory of that first meeting over in her mind, even as she gathered the gift she’d ordered for Potter up and followed him down a corridor and into the massive, sunlit central room of the Manor. She could still remember Potter’s pale face, the staring eyes that indicated he was thinking of his own ends before anyone else’s. She had thought him a fanatic, and easy to trick and delude as all fanatics were. He had magic, of course he did, but he wore only the appearance of power, and she could drape him over herself like a cloak easily enough.

That boy was nothing like the one who confronted her now, turning her barbs with ease and seeming utterly unashamed of his lack of a left hand.

Henrietta raised her eyebrows at the long table, already set with a few gifts, and placed her own among them. Well. She had made her mistake, and she had paid for it with a few moments of humiliation.

She intended to pay with nothing else. She had listened to the stories about Potter when ordering her gift, even as she let her own impressions of him order her behavior. The gift was one for a more dangerous man, adapted to Potter's unique circumstances. It might have shattered him if he were really as weak as she thought. Now Henrietta could be thankful for her foresight. At the very least, it would inflict a deep wound.

She turned and summoned a smile to her face even as she saw Honoria Pemberley, of all the Dark witches in her acquaintance the one she despised the most, come towards her with her hand out. Henrietta tried to take the hand, and it vanished. Pemberley giggled.

Henrietta simply nodded, as though amused at the trick, and waited. Potter would open her gift soon, and she could be content in the knowledge that he would suffer when he did.

"...and then he ate the whole thing!"

Harry couldn't help smiling as he listened to Honoria Pemberley narrate the tale of the pudding she'd created with illusions, and which her father had attempted to eat gamely despite most of it vanishing and bending around his spoon. She was an accomplished illusionist, she reassured him, strong enough to create the glammers of taste and scent which had fooled her father. Harry resolved to keep that in mind whenever he was dealing with her.

"Potter." Thomas Rhangnara had all but bounced up to him, with a woman Harry hadn't seen before at his shoulder. "This is Priscilla Burke, my wife. Well, she was Priscilla Burke when we married. She's Priscilla Rhangnara now. That is, if she changed her name." He

turned to his wife with a slight frown. "I keep forgetting to ask, dear. Did you change your name officially, or didn't you?"

Priscilla smiled tolerantly at her husband and held out her hand to Harry. She was a tall woman with a fall of golden hair that looked longer than it was thanks to the length of her neck. In reality, Harry saw, it stopped just short of her shoulders. Her eyes were large and wide and as green as his mother's, but both harder and warmer, like jade put in a fire. "It's Priscilla Burke still, dear. I wanted it to be." She turned her attention fully to Harry. "Auror Priscilla Burke, technically. And yes, that's possible because I've never Declared. Neither Scrimgeour nor Mallory would have tolerated a Dark Auror working in their department."

"You really should Declare, my dear," said Thomas chidingly. "I told you, the Dark has the best arguments. True Dark wizards work individually, yes, but in patterns that collapse and change according to the wills of the wizards involved. Think of constellations. Stars can move. Do they shine the less brightly for that? No, they don't. And of course they can be grouped into different constellations. Take Achernar—"

Priscilla guided her husband away with a firm hand on his elbow, and an eyeroll at Harry that told him she knew well how to manage Thomas. Harry found that oddly reassuring. He wanted people at this celebration who were less than focused on him. Thomas was the only one he could absolutely count on to be so, though.

For example, he was acutely aware of Henrietta's eyes on him every time he moved, and Draco's as well.

Henrietta's scrutiny he could understand, but Draco's seemed to have something to do with his gift, given the way his gaze darted back and forth between Harry and the box sitting on the table. Harry caught his eye and smiled, trying to reassure him that he would love it, whatever it was. Draco looked away.

Harry rolled his own eyes. Fine. Be like that. He probably thinks he would manage me like Priscilla manages Thomas, but I think I could return the favor a time or two.

Then he blinked and touched his head. I don't understand myself sometimes. I still don't know if I'm going to survive the War, and I'm thinking about Draco and me joining?

He shook his head and glanced about for Narcissa. It was nearly noon, and from the look of it, no more allies were due to arrive. Edward Burke was the only one missing and he had already sent a sneering letter saying that, due to the unfortunate presence of the halfblood Honoria Pemberley, he preferred to stay home and wait for a more dignified occasion of celebration.

He'll either get over that or stop being my ally right quick, Harry thought, even as Narcissa caught his eye and nodded at him.

"Thank you for coming," said Harry, casting a mild Sonorus on himself so that his voice captured everyone's attention at once. "If you would sit down at the table, we do have a meal planned for you."

His allies moved to take their places. Harry sat at the head of the table, of course, flanked by Draco and Narcissa. Lucius took his place next to his wife, but Harry was curious about where the others would sit.

Henrietta, he was amused to see, took a position exactly in the middle of the left side, neither far from him nor near. Honoria, Tybalt Starrise, and his joined partner John gravitated together into a giggling, arguing, sometimes sneezing clump. Ignifer took a seat next to Lucius, sitting bolt upright and returning him blank proud look for blank proud look. Mortimer Belville sat on the other side of Henrietta, a safe distance back from the table, so that he wouldn't get food on his robes, Harry thought. Thomas would probably have stood if he were allowed, or wandered from place to place talking, but Priscilla took his arm and guided him gently to a seat next to Draco. Charles and his wife Medusa, whom Harry had met only in passing thanks to Honoria insisting on monopolizing his time, sat a few chairs down on the other side of Ignifer. Harry had to admit he approved of that. Charles was obviously a cautious man, and though his presence here bespoke his allegiances, he stood as near to neutrality as he still could while Harry paid him no special notice.

Hawthorn took the seat next to Ignifer, ignoring the woman with easy grace. Elfrida and Adalrico were next to her, Elfrida cooing softly to Marian and not looking up often. A permanent blush seemed to stain her cheeks. Harry could hardly credit that this was the same woman who had sternly asked him questions about his health yesterday. She was very different now—but then, puellaris witches were trained to be fierce only in defense of their children, and to act as modest and retired as possible in public.

Harry wondered, as the house elves carried in plates to everyone except him—he was casually levitating his lunch out of the kitchen instead—what his allies would think of the meal.

Mortimer was the first to react, staring down at the plate as if it were covered with worms and not pasta. “Potter,” he said. “There must be some mistake. Birthday dinners between the ages of fourteen and sixteen traditionally begin with stuffed quails. The birthday dinners of Auglorious the Red began the custom,” he added, and then paused, as if he were waiting for Harry to ask who Auglorious the Red had been.

Harry didn’t intend to give the pompous scholar the satisfaction. “Not just pasta,” he said, and then poured the bowl of tomato sauce that had floated after his plate over the pasta, casually hovering the dish just over his left wrist. “Spaghetti. I like it.” He smiled at Mortimer. “Do eat up, Mr. Belville.”

Mortimer looked as if he could conceive of nothing more horrifying, probably because the sauce would tend to get on his robes. He extended his fork and poked at the pasta, and then shook his head. Harry noted that Honoria, Tybalt, and John had all dug in with squeals of recognition and delight, and Narcissa, who had known about this from the beginning, was eating with resignation, but most of his other allies were staring at him. Draco poked the spaghetti several times with his fork before seeming to understand that it wouldn’t hurt him.

“Isn’t this a Muggle food, Potter?” Charles Rosier-Henlin asked at last, his voice fascinated.

"In origin, I think." Harry levitated a napkin over to himself and dabbed at some of the sauce that had already escaped onto his chin. He was more thankful than ever for his magic since he'd lost his left hand. He could use it to do simple things like wipe his face without letting go of his fork. "I don't really know that much about it, just that I like it."

He went back to eating, and gradually, one by one, his allies did the same. Harry knew he was still receiving stares, and felt entertained. They would be seeking some subtle message in his choice of food.

The only one Harry intended was quite simple and obvious, really; he thought it was more significant that he was eating without house elves serving him, though they had still cooked the food (which he was unhappy about, but Narcissa had refused to allow him in the kitchens). I am stronger than I was at one point. And in minor matters, I'm going to do as I like.

Finally, everyone except Mortimer had finished, and he pushed the plate away as though glad to have an excuse for quitting. Harry heard him fervently muttering cleaning charms to himself as the house elves came out and fetched their plates away—with the exception of Harry's, which had tamely taken itself back to the kitchens already.

"I suppose I should open my gifts now," said Harry aloud.

"Please do, Potter." Henrietta Bulstrode was leaning forward, her eyes bearing the gleam of a hunting cat. "Open mine first, if you wouldn't mind. I spent some time fussing over my choice."

"How wonderful, madam," said Harry casually, even as he summoned Henrietta's box to him. "You've only had a week to know about this." Narcissa had told him that much yesterday, when he'd tried to talk her out of a large birthday celebration and failed. "It must have been a lot of fussing concentrated into a small space of time, and yet it doesn't show on your face at all." He smiled at Henrietta, and then opened the box with a snip of his magic.

"Well, it's very small, Potter, but it is what I want to give you," Henrietta was saying.

Inside the box lay a gleaming left hand, sculpted of silver. Harry had seen a few wizards wearing them in the past, long before he had any reason to be interested in them.

He raised his eyebrows and glanced up at Henrietta. Her eyes devoured his expression. Obviously, she'd hoped he would flinch, be hurt, panic.

"It's handsome," Harry admitted, letting his magic levitate the hand out and spin it front of his face. "Unfortunately, the wrist is a bit too big to attach to mine." He smiled at Henrietta. "But I appreciate the thought, and even the pun. It was very clever of you, to think about giving me a hand."

Someone giggled. Harry thought it was Honoria. The rest of his allies were sitting in absolute silence. Harry directed his beaming smile around the table, then laid the hand and the box both aside. He did detect a flash of stunned disbelief in Henrietta's eyes before her face smoothed again.

She expected me to be ashamed of being crippled, then. I'm not. This is a war-wound. I'll leave the glamour off, not draw attention to it unless I'm asked, and then admit to it. Neither hiding nor flaunting is the way to go. This is just part of who I am, at least until I figure out how to break the last of Bellatrix's spells.

He grinned at Honoria. "Should I open yours next?"

"Oh, please do." As he called her box to him, Honoria made tiny hovering phoenixes follow it and chirp at the ceiling. Harry opened it with a sense of real curiosity. He didn't know what whim of hers Honoria might have gratified in choosing a gift.

He found a silver whistle, and held it up with his hand, letting it spin on its chain. "What does this do, madam?"

"Blow it," Honoria suggested, and then began laughing aloud.

Harry concentrated, but couldn't identify any Dark magic on it. He shrugged, put the whistle to his lips, and blew.

Everyone sitting around the table promptly burst into laughter. From the looks of things, they wanted to stop laughing, but they couldn't. On and on they went, as if they were being tickled mercilessly. Mortimer Belville actually fell out of his chair. Medusa Rosier-Henlin was holding her sides in pain. Lucius's eyes were furious above his distended mouth.

Though Honoria hadn't told him how to stop the effect, Harry decided that he could do worse than blow the whistle again. As the shrill sound echoed around the room, everyone relaxed and stopped laughing. Lucius's face had gone icy.

"That was a ridiculous gift," he told Honoria.

"Was it?" Honoria tilted her head to the side. "I don't think it was. Think about it, Mr. Malfoy. Harry here blows that whistle at his enemies, they start laughing, and he escapes." She shrugged, looking extremely smug. "And they won't easily think the whistle is a weapon, either, because it's my own invention, and not registered with the Ministry."

Harry nodded at Honoria and put the whistle back in its box. He wasn't entirely sure if he approved of her doing that and embarrassing his other allies, but at least she'd been laughing right along with the rest of them—and the whistle hadn't affected Harry at all. He could take it as a protective gift, if he wanted to. He still wasn't sure he could trust her.

But she is fun, he had to admit.

Several of the other gifts were more prosaic—a set of fine robes from Mortimer Belville, a tiny mechanical lion that paced and roared from Tybalt and John ("to bring some Gryffindor influence back into your life," according to Tybalt), a book on Quidditch from Charles and Medusa. Harry smiled at Charles, understanding the import of the gift. They weren't pretending to know him better than they did, and they were still making a statement of neutrality. Charles would have known

that he liked Quidditch from Harry's conversation with Owen at the last meeting. Harry nodded at him as he put the book aside, and received a surprised glance, followed by a slow relaxation, from Charles in return. Medusa leaned her head on her husband's shoulder and smiled widely in Harry's direction.

He was utterly unsurprised when the large, flat packet from Thomas and Priscilla turned out to be a book on the constellations. He nodded to them as he stroked the cover. "Thank you."

"There's also philosophy inside," said Thomas eagerly. "All about the comparison of Dark wizards to stars, and how—"

"Dear." Priscilla put her hand on his shoulder. "Do you want to spoil the book for Potter? I know that you don't like it when someone does that to you."

Thomas's eyes widened in horror. "Of course not! I'm sorry, Potter." He nodded several times. "My lips are sealed now. You'll just have to discover the book's wonders on your own."

Harry smiled and put the book aside. He was already getting a little weary of the gifts, though. Honestly. No one needs this many.

He frowned when he received Ignifer's present. It looked like a broad, flat rock, but it was copper-colored, and thin, and sharp on the edges. He took it up, gingerly, so that he didn't cut himself, and looked at her.

"It's a dragon scale," said Ignifer softly. "From a Peruvian Vipertooth. If you need my help, Potter, wave it in the air, and it'll ignite and let me find you anywhere in Britain."

Harry blinked. It was a more open declaration of alliance than any of his new allies had made so far, unless one counted their coming to these meetings at all as an absolute commitment, which Harry didn't. "I—thank you."

"You're welcome." Ignifer leaned forward, never looking away from him, her yellow eyes as proud as a hawk's. Harry experienced a dizzy moment as he gazed at her. She appeared a distant figure out of

legend. Her looks bespoke Light witch so strongly that he found it hard to reconcile them with the aura of Dark magic that pulsed about her, even knowing the facts about her expulsion from her family as he did. "It's the least I can do, if you are also offering me a sense of belonging."

Harry nodded slowly. Whether it was because of her heritage or something else, Ignifer was offering him a true alliance. He was not about to disdain it.

"Thank you," he repeated, and then set the dragon scale down and turned to the gifts from his closer allies.

From the Bulstrodes, of course, came a book on the strategy Adalrico had been trying to teach him, and a book on taking proper care of oneself. Harry flashed a sheepish glance at Elfrida. For one moment, he saw fangs among her teeth. He wondered what Millicent had been punished with if she didn't eat properly and go to bed on time.

Hawthorn gave him a silver frame. Harry swallowed when he saw what it contained: a wizarding photograph of Dragonsbane. Swaddled in black, of course, so that his face could not be seen, as Harry had always known him. A necromancer never showed his face to anyone but his spouse and children. Still, that Hawthorn would give this picture up in the first place to the one who had killed her husband...

Harry met her eyes solidly. "Thank you."

Hawthorn merely nodded. Harry had to look away as he set the photograph in a place of honor beside him.

Narcissa and Lucius's gift was a silver bracelet, carved with delicate letters. Harry couldn't make out what they spelled, though. He didn't even know if they were runes, or ordinary letters so entwined with vines and the like as to make them unreadable. He glanced at her with, he knew, a faint frown on his face.

Narcissa leaned forward and laid her hand over his. Her voice was low but clear. "As a wizarding child gets older, Harry, he should have some emblem of his becoming an adult, and more and more a

representative of the family instead of just someone who shelters under its protection. This bracelet is that.” She nodded to it. “We couldn’t, of course, just adopt you into the Black or Malfoy families, but we can show how much you mean to us: one Black by birth, one Malfoy by birth, and now a mingled family of both bloods. Please consider yourself bound and entwined with both of us, not only with the Malfoys.” She lowered her voice. “And, of course, if you ever do find yourself bound even more firmly, we would not object.” She led Harry’s gaze to the side, and he met Draco’s.

Draco’s face held an odd expression: hope, and determination, and caution. Harry swallowed, and couldn’t look away for a long moment. When he could, his cheeks were burning. He suspected he was about to find himself pursued with more determination.

He examined the bracelet to distract himself, and found that he could make out the letters, now. They were the Malfoy and Black mottos, intertwined. He smiled at Narcissa, and clasped the bracelet around his right wrist. “Thank you. I accept.”

Narcissa relaxed. Only then did Harry realize that she’d been nervous he might reject the bracelet.

Why? Just because I’m Potter by birth?

Harry shook his head briskly. He was his parents’ son, yes, and in more ways than just by blood, but that didn’t mean he would ever be heir to Lux Aeterna or anything else James or Lily Potter owned. He would have refused them if they were offered. He didn’t see why he should want them.

He forced the emotions away from him by smiling at Draco. “Well, Draco, it’s time for your gift.”

The expression on Draco’s face became tinged with faint panic, but he didn’t try to stop Harry from summoning the large box to himself and opening it.

Harry felt his own face change as he stared at the small snake in the box. He swallowed. It was inevitable that he should, he thought

defensively. Memories of Sylarana were brewing in his head. He half-wanted to shout at Draco for getting him another snake at all.

But he put his hand into the box and hissed a soft greeting. The snake raised his head, hissed back, and crawled onto his arm. Harry lifted him out, staring at him and trying to appreciate everything that Draco had done for him.

Harry had recognized his breed at once. He was an Omen snake, one of a species of serpents whose bodies could reflect the future, and who sometimes appeared as signals of the fulfillment of prophecies or signs of impending disaster or fortune. His scales were utterly smooth, the color of milk—until they caught the light. Then they brewed and stormed with silver and white and gold, and sometimes shone transparent. He was beautiful, his head slender and more pointed than Sylarana's had been, his eyes a pale, cloudless blue-green, like the sky during a particularly fine sunset.

And he was of the Light. Omen snakes had always been associated with it.

Harry stared at Draco across the top of the box, and Draco nodded back at him.

"I got him because I thought he would be a good companion for you, Harry," he said. "When Omen snakes choose, they're more friends than—than pets." He coughed. "If he likes you. He might not."

Harry looked back down at the snake. A companion. And of the Light, and male.

He really was trying to give me someone who could be a friend, and who would remind me as little of Sylarana as possible.

There was another way in which he didn't remind Harry of Sylarana, Harry thought, as the snake yawned. He had no fangs. He was a constrictor, not a venomous biter.

Harry took a deep breath, and said in Parseltongue, "Hello. Do you like me? I'm not sure that you do."

The snake cocked his head seriously to the side. "I'm not sure yet, either," he said. "But I think so. You speak, yes, but it would take more than that to win my affection. You hold me gently, and that matters more. And you smell shocky, but you keep going through the pain. That is worth a great deal. I think that I will stay with you at least a few days, and if you cannot be my friend, then we will part with no hard feelings." Shining like a ripple of living water, he climbed to Harry's shoulder and curled the lower part of his body there, lifting his head to touch his tongue to Harry's cheek. He was only about six inches right now, but he would grow, Harry knew, until he was at least as long as an adult wizard's torso. "I like the way you smell."

Harry swallowed. "Good," he tried. "What is your name?"

"I do not have one," said the snake placidly. "But I would like one in the language wizards use for spells. I like that one. If I could choose any human language to speak, it would be that one."

Harry nodded, and watched the snake for a moment, trying to think of a suitable Latin name. The serpent had turned outward to watch the rest of his allies, who were sitting still. Harry wondered if any of them knew how to react. He thought not.

The snake twisted once more, his scales flashed, and the perfect name came to Harry.

"What about Argutus?" he said aloud. The word meant "clear," and also "significant," when applied to omens.

"I like that," said the snake happily. "I think I like you. But I must wait a while to make up my mind, and I mean no offense if I do not choose you for a companion. There are many people who are simply not suited to be friends to an Omen snake."

Harry had to close his eyes, then. Omen snakes formed no involuntary bonds. He had known that, once, but had forgotten; it was a long time since he'd read about magical serpents. Argutus would choose to be his or not of his own free will.

Draco has done this for me. And he knew exactly what he was doing.

Harry lifted his head and opened his eyes. Draco's fear melted. Harry didn't know exactly what his own face was showing, but he suspected it wasn't half his emotions.

So he nerved himself, braced himself, and leaned forward to kiss Draco, gently, on the cheek. "Thank you," he whispered into his ear, while Argutus grumbled and adjusted his perch, slithering down his left arm to coil about his wrist, and he heard a few of his allies buzzing. "You don't know how much this means to me."

"Enough for you to kiss me in public." Draco's eyes were brilliant when Harry sat back. "I think I do, Harry."

Harry stared one more moment before he turned away. That gaze was just a bit too intimate, and made him feel like he was in freefall. He needed to move past this awkward, and potentially vulnerable, moment.

He graced the rest of the company with a smile. "Should I have the house elves bring in dessert?"

Interlude: More Than Yourself

July 31st, 1995

Dear Harry:

First of all, happy birthday. I would have written earlier, but I had no idea of what was happening in the outside world—one of the few disadvantages of living in the Seers' Sanctuary. The shadows they create around the building to protect themselves also slow and bewilder the owls, so that post takes forever to reach us. They have opened a path in the shadows for my owl to fly swiftly.

But you know all that. I am only trying to put off expressing my letter's real purpose.

Snape has written to me. He has invited me to return and testify against Dumbledore. A copy of the Daily Prophet has reached us now, and we know exactly what he was charged with.

He, and your parents. Harry, I am so sorry. I never suspected that James would be so faithless, even knowing what he did to put me in Azkaban. I had thought that a parent's love for his children would prevail over his bond with Lily.

I regret that I will never have the opportunity to set some of the rats I have an understanding with upon him, but perhaps it is better this way.

Understand please, Harry: I am returning. I know that Lily, James, and Dumbledore have inflicted damage on you that can never be repaired, but they have also hurt me. I will testify in Dumbledore's trial, and against your parents as to the effects of the abuse I witnessed. I know that the Aurors will hunt me, but I intend to give myself to the Ministry and insist on undergoing interrogation with Veritaserum. With all luck, I will be free by the time the trials come around.

It is time the truth be known. Again, Harry, I am sorry, in case you see this as a betrayal, but they have hurt more people than yourself.

There were some segments of wizarding culture, a few hundred years ago, who believed that fifteen was the age of adulthood, rather than seventeen, as we now think. I hope that it is so for you, that you are able to understand why I am doing this, even as you may taste the bitterness of age.

Sincerely,

Peter Pettigrew.

August 1st, 1995

Dear Peter:

I do understand the reasons that you are returning, and if I had thought about it at all, I might have assumed Snape would contact you. Thank you for writing and informing me, however.

I will do nothing to prevent or interfere in your testimony. How could I? You deserve justice. The abuses that my parents and Dumbledore inflicted on you are not ones that I could deny, nor do I wish to.

Since you have been so honest with me, I will be honest in return. Though you may have been able to guess it, since you know the person I used to be, I did not give my permission to Snape to file these charges, and I have not cooperated with him at all so far. I will not try to free my parents or Dumbledore, or prevent the trials from going forward. They do have some opportunity of doing good, in exposing those crimes perpetrated on you and other innocent victims, whatever the outcome may be of the crimes they are charged with against me.

However, I am going to testify on the way I see their abuse of me, which, as I am continually reminded, is very different from the way that others see it. I plan to argue for leniency in those charges I can affect. I have done enough research on child abuse to discover how often the punishment in such cases, if the Wizengamot finds the criminals guilty, is execution. My parents and Dumbledore might deserve death for what they have done to others—that is not for me to say—but it is the charges affecting me that could prove fatal to

them. I plan to struggle with every breath in my body before I let the sentence of execution come down.

So long as they are still alive, they have the chance to change. They cannot do that if they are dead.

I understand you perfectly. I hope you will understand me, and not take this as a declaration of war on your principles. I am already embroiled in a struggle with someone who does.

Sincerely,

Harry.

August 2nd, 1995

Harry:

I believe that you still do not understand me. I will try to explain myself one more time.

I did what I did because I believed it was the right thing to do, and so that neither your parents nor Dumbledore could ever threaten you again. I did this to secure your future. I knew that you would hate me for it, and that you have reached out to me with your letters is more than I had any right to hope. But I do not intend to retract or drop the charges, no matter what you may say in the trial. And you should know that my testimony will directly oppose your own. Pettigrew, McGonagall, and the Malfoys, I have no doubt, will also testify on the side of the prosecution. That is not to mention all the others who may have something to say. Even if your parents and Dumbledore manage to call character witnesses, I expect them to be imprisoned, and perhaps stripped of their magic.

I have made my choice. You may hate me again before all is done, but I will continue my course. I regret only the pain that has come between us, and the necessity of having to do this at all. I do not regret the exposure of the abuse.

Severus Snape.

August 3rd, 1995

Dear Snape:

I understand you perfectly. You are the one who continues to misunderstand me.

I will do nothing to prevent your testimony, or anyone else's. I understand that people have a right to speak their minds. I am not trying to make you regret anything you do not. I understand that you have a right to your emotions.

What I will do is pursue my will. By my desire and by my will, I am doing what I feel must be done, what is most in accord with my own personal code of justice. There are places that my actions affect other people, where I cannot follow a certain course because it would crush the freedom of others. This is not one of them. If anything, I am striving to secure the lives of others.

I am telling the truth as I know it. Why is this so hard for you to grasp? Why do you think that my doing so will somehow silence you? I know it will not. And if you think me contemptuous, speaking in scorn—the only cause for scorn I have is that you still think of yourself in some position of authority that can control my actions.

Your legal guardianship over me is a formality only, preserved by Scrimgeour. I will not oppose it for now. But, so far as I am concerned, the only connection we currently have is that of two principled men on the opposite side of a debate of principles. I understand why you did what you did. That does not stop me from hating it. You understand why I am doing what I do. That does not stop you from thinking me wrong.

Kindly cease to think of me as an abused child who does not know what he is doing, or someone who is only trying to spare the lives of my parents and Dumbledore because of a misguided love of sacrifice. I would try to spare the life of anyone who was charged with potentially fatal crimes against me. I ripped apart and rebuilt my mind,

and I can choose to forgive them, rather than being compelled to do so.

Peter wrote to me that this is larger than I am. Of course it is. And the world contains more than you and your perceptions, Snape. It always has, but that was never truer than it is now. Perhaps you should consider that. You may have given up your grudge against my father, but you are just as blind as you ever were.

Harry Potter.

Chapter Eleven: Madam Shiverwood

“But we have to go with you.” Draco said that as if he were talking to someone legless, who had proposed standing up and walking before his artificial legs arrived.

“No, you don’t have to.” Harry smiled over Draco’s shoulder at Narcissa, who was waiting patiently for him on the other side of the library, and shut the book called *Dark Blades: Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Knives and Feared Would Cut You*. “I’m going with your mum to the Ministry, and I’m grateful that she decided to take me, but I have to go into the interrogation—“

“Questioning, Harry,” said Narcissa.

Harry shrugged. So far as he was concerned, it was an interrogation. “With Madam Shiverwood alone,” he told Draco. “Someone else there with me might either constrain what I’m going to say or make me tell more than I’m comfortable with.” He was quoting the letter the Ministry had sent him about his appointment with Madam Shiverwood yesterday, but the words sounded more natural when he said them, he thought. They should. He’d practiced them several times before he got up this morning, knowing Draco would object to their parting.

Draco folded his arms and tapped his foot. Harry waited patiently. He was confident he could talk Draco out of coming into the interrogation room with him. Narcissa was on his side, and that was always a good thing where handling her son was concerned.

Draco chose to object to something else, though. “I wish I could be there so that I know you’re saying as much as you should, Harry,” he said.

“Huh?” Not my most eloquent moment, Harry thought an instant later, but Draco seemed to ignore it entirely as he clasped Harry’s wrists and looked into his eyes. Argutus, coiled happily about Harry’s lower left arm, hissed as Draco squeezed him and slithered up towards his shoulder.

“Are you actually going to tell her about the abuse, Harry?” Draco asked. “Or only what you think she should know?”

Harry narrowed his eyes. Is he going to suspect me just like Snape does? “I’ll answer all the questions she asks me with the truth,” he said shortly. “I won’t lie. I made a promise to myself about that during my time in Godric’s Hollow.”

“But if what she doesn’t touch on one aspect of the abuse?” Draco asked.

“Then she doesn’t.”

“Harry—“

Harry shook his head, and drew his wrists gently but irresistibly out of Draco’s grip. “I really do appreciate that you’re concerned,” he said, aware that his voice didn’t sound like it. “But since this is a personal decision that I’m making, I wish you wouldn’t push it. There’s one point when you wouldn’t have pushed it,” he couldn’t help adding.

“Expect to be pushed more from now on,” Draco murmured.

Harry stared at him. Draco didn’t try to look to the side, and Harry caught a glimpse, for the first time, of just how much he’d changed in the past two months.

Damn. And double damn. He does think I won’t collapse at any moment now. So he’s going to shove. Get more of what he wants, and what he thinks would be good for me instead of just what I tell him I want.

“Harry?”

Harry shook his head and turned away from Draco, though he could feel his eyes on his back like a brand. “Coming, Mrs. Malfoy—“

“Narcissa.”

Harry smiled at her, and did his best to ignore the odd feeling of excitement that had overtaken him. When he met Madam Shiverwood, he would have to be as collected as possible. "Narcissa, then. I'm ready."

"Ah, Mr. Potter. Please come in."

Harry entered the office of the Head of Magical Family and Child Services, staring around. He hadn't had much chance to notice the décor here when he and Snape came to meet James for the custody hearing. Then, he'd been mostly occupied with watching what Snape's insanity potion did. Now, almost a year later, he could see the picture of a child on each wall, and the deliberately calm and soothing atmosphere of the office, and suspect that Madam Hellebore Shiverwood took her job very earnestly indeed.

And I don't need to worry about that because I have nothing to worry about, he told himself firmly again. I'm going to tell the truth. All of it. I wouldn't ever try to prevent my parents from being imprisoned or punished. I will try to show why I don't think they deserve execution. That's all.

And that was precisely why both Draco and Snape seemed to be angry at him.

Harry shook his shoulders and focused on Madam Shiverwood, who'd come from behind her desk with her hand held out to him. Harry shook it, concentrating on her face. Her eyes were direct, and full of sympathy.

There was another light in them too, though, one that made Harry tilt his head to the side. She's impatient with this? Does she think it's as useless as I do, since my testimony at the trial should really work to establish my parents' guilt or innocence?

Thoughtfully, Harry took the chair in front of Madam Shiverwood's desk, wondering how he could use this.

“Now, Mr. Potter,” said the witch, as she sat. “You know that the purpose of this session is to draw some basic facts about your abuse from you, and try to offer you some comfort with them.”

She examined him like an insect. Harry knew why, having read about this point of the interrogation in the books on child abuse in the Malfoy library. She would be watching to see if he flinched at the word “abuse,” or averted his eyes, or made any of the more subtle signs of discomfort.

Harry supposed he might have made one that he didn’t know about, but all those he did recognize, he had been ready to control, and he did. He simply nodded, his eyes wide and guileless. She had to see how fine he was with this, that his focus wasn’t on angrily resisting her questions and denying the abuse had ever happened. He was doing exactly what he thought was right, exactly what he had thought a few weeks ago most people would be happy with him for doing.

And yet, no one seems to be happy with me.

Harry snorted to himself as Madam Shiverwood scribbled something down. That’s because my behavior wasn’t what they really wanted. Snape wants me to think the exact same way about this that he does. I don’t know what Draco wants, but maybe it’s the same thing.

Well, they can’t have that. My thoughts are my own. It happened to me, as they keep reminding me, and that means that I’m allowed to have my own opinion of it.

Madam Shiverwood looked up at last and gave him a smile Harry couldn’t help thinking of as insincere. “Let’s start with your mother, Mr. Potter.”

Harry nodded.

“How long has her abuse of you continued?”

“From the time I was a year and a half old, until the year that my brother and I went to Hogwarts,” said Harry promptly. “That was 1991,” he added, when the witch muttered and dug through some of

the notes on her desk. "Since then, there have been scattered incidents, but I only saw her over the summer and briefly for some holidays. She had no time to build up a sustained cycle of abuse." See? I'm using the word. I'm adult. I can face this.

Madam Shiverwood clucked her tongue as she wrote that down. "And what would you say the most damaging part of her abuse was?"

Harry smiled in spite of himself, acknowledging a question he hadn't been prepared for. "Training to be a sacrifice," he said. "She said I was to die for my brother if necessary, to give him all the credit for achievements like winning Quidditch games even when I won them, to use my magic to protect and defend him and put him forward. When I managed to break out of that mindset with my brother, I found myself doing the same thing with other people."

"The most damaging part was not the phoenix web, then?" Madam Shiverwood scowled at her notes. "Your guardian seemed to think it was."

Harry frowned. "The phoenix web bound my magic, and tied my loyalty to my brother," he said. "But the sacrificial training was deliberate. The phoenix web had many consequences which my mother and Dumbledore no more expected than you expect someone to break a leg when you push him down a hill."

She glanced quickly up at him. "But the fact remains that they pushed you down the hill in the first place," she said, voice soft.

"Yes. Well." Harry shrugged and struggled to regain control of himself. Snape wasn't even here. Harry had no reason to get angry at this stage of the game. "They did. But you asked me what I thought was most damaging, and not my guardian. And the sacrificial training was my answer."

"How would you describe the other abuses you suffered?" Madam Shiverwood sat back and watched him, eyes sharp, but face gentle.

Not playing fair, Harry wanted to whine. This was another question he hadn't expected. Questions about dates and specific incidents, yes, but not forcing him to fall back on wide consideration of his abuse.

But you can do this, because you're strong.

Harry ignored the way his nose stung when he breathed through it, and walked forward. "Hard," he said. "In my mother's eyes, necessary, but now I realize that most of them were not so—"

"Only most of them?" Madam Shiverwood was on that like a mongoose on a cobra. "Why not all of them?"

Harry hunched his back. Argutus hissed sleepily at him from his shoulder. "You smell as if you are in pain," he said. "And you should not have come here alone, I think. When my kind are as young in the general span of our years as you are in yours, then we are always with our mother and our siblings. You need your sibling, since your mother is evil."

Harry found the soft words soothing. "It's a human thing," he said, and saw Madam Shiverwood's eyes widen at his Parseltongue. "Sorry," he added to her, and turned to focus on Argutus. "Not something I can help right now, that my sibling's separated from me."

"Humans are clever sometimes, but marvelously stupid others," Argutus murmured, and, to Harry's relief, went back to sleep.

"Is that something you do often?" Madam Shiverwood was rattled and trying not to show it, but her voice gave her away. "Speak to snakes?"

"When there's a snake to be spoken to." Harry owed her the truth on that, too.

Madam Shiverwood shook her head once or twice, and managed to gain control of herself, apparently. Then she returned to the question that Harry had hoped she would forget. "Why do you see only most of the abuses as unnecessary?"

"A slip of the tongue." Harry shifted uneasily. "Of course all of them were things that she should not have done to me."

"Forgive me, Harry," the witch said, her voice now completely soft. "But in this kind of environment, such slips of the tongue are significant. Please tell me what you meant. Let me reverse the question," she added, before he could say anything. "What parts of your abuse would you describe as necessary?"

Harry lifted his head. He thought he might know for a moment how the stag felt, followed by hounds.

But then he reminded himself that he had other concerns than how pressed and harassed he felt by Madam Shiverwood's questions. Lives rode on what he was doing. He forced his breathing back under control and smiled at her. Madam Shiverwood blinked.

Harry summoned the truth, fashioned it into words, and made them flow from his lips. "I suppose I think that some of the discipline was necessary," he admitted. "Training me to resist torture, for example. If she hadn't done that, I wouldn't have survived my experience with Voldemort this summer. I would certainly have snapped, or perhaps simply died from the shock."

Madam Shiverwood flinched at the sound of the Dark Lord's name, but said, "Just because it had good consequences doesn't make it good. You know that, Harry, don't you?"

"I do now, madam." Harry thought of Godric's Hollow, of how he'd used that insight to build up part of the skeleton of his mind.

"But you continue to think this part of the abuse was good? Was necessary?"

"I'm grateful that it happened," said Harry. He could watch her face twist in pity, he told himself. It was not as hard as losing his hand, or kissing Draco in front of other people. "Not the same thing, perhaps. I know what would have happened to me if it wasn't there. And I do prefer being abused to snapping permanently under Voldemort's

torture. With my magic, I would have done more damage to many more people.”

“Harry.” Madam Shiverwood’s voice was soft. She leaned across the desk to clasp his hand. “Please, listen to me. I want you to listen to me.”

Harry nodded. He’d expected this part, too.

“Your mother had no right to do what she did to you,” Madam Shiverwood whispered. “Even now, you’re using and building on the premises that she taught you to obey. It would have been understandable if you had snapped. You shouldn’t have had to cast pain curses on yourself just to insure you didn’t. And you are still thinking more about the damage others would have suffered than the damage you did.”

“For the first,” Harry said, floating a little iceberg of calmness on top of the sea of pain, and making sure only the calmness got access to his lips, “I do find it hard to regret. Perhaps that’s wrong, but it’s what I feel.”

“Nothing you feel is wrong, Harry,” Madam Shiverwood whispered.

But you think it is. Harry recognized the look in her eyes. She wanted to cure him of those kinds of thoughts, just as Snape did, just as Draco did. Harry preferred to keep the sanctity of his own mind intact. He’d had enough of other people meddling in it.

“As for the second,” Harry continued, “that’s part of my training that I never want to give up. I do care for others, Madam Shiverwood, yes. I know now that that does no good if I’m so weak or hurt that I can’t actually accomplish anything for them. I deprived myself of sleep to tutor others, and in the end that was useless, because I collapsed at the first pressure and missed their tutoring sessions.” Wincingly, he touched the memory of Hawthorn forcing him into a breakdown last year, and then putting him to bed. It still made him want to hide when he thought about it. He’d been stupid, and more, he’d acted like a child, and so been treated like one. “So I want to go on caring for others. I promise that I no longer believe, as my mother tried to train

me to believe, that every little whim and pleasure of my brother, or anyone else, is more important than my own health.”

“And what about your own whims and pleasures?”

“Beg pardon?” Harry felt a bit dizzy. Madam Shiverwood wasn’t conducting this interrogation exactly like the sample ones in the Malfoy books, which wasn’t fair.

“How do you feel your own whims and pleasures compare to others’?” Madam Shiverwood simply watched him, never taking her hand from his. Now her fingers were stroking the back of it. Harry wriggled uncomfortably.

“I can tell you,” he said. “But you’re not going to like the truth.”

“Nevertheless, I wish to know it.”

Harry nodded. “The greatest pleasure I get is helping others,” he said. “That’s still true. It will always be true, I think. And if the things I want are only whims, then there’s really no sense in indulging them. But I am trying to get better. Really. I know now that there’s no harm to my wanting something, that it’s not selfish just because I’m the one doing the wanting. It’s putting it into action that gives me hives.”

Madam Shiverwood smiled at him. “That was a very honest answer, Harry,” she said. “I admit, when you came here, I felt—oddly disposed towards you. I thought, for some reason, that you would refuse to give me any information at all. But that’s disappeared from my mind like a fog in the morning. You’re being honest, and I appreciate it. It’s often very difficult for abused children to admit they’ve been abused at all.”

Harry nodded. He still objected to the “children” part of that description, but she had no need to know that.

“So we’ve taken the first step,” Madam Shiverwood continued comfortingly. “Now. I’d like you to do something for me between now and the time when I next see you again.”

Harry blinked. "We're done? That's it?" He had thought she would require more evidence from him on how much abuse his mother had inflicted.

"For now, we're done," said Madam Shiverwood with a nod, sitting back. Harry was relieved when she let his hand go. "The purpose of this session was to begin healing you, Harry. Sometimes a Healer is actually the best person for that, but mental and emotional abuse to the extent that you suffered are—well, different. They're rarer than outright physical or sexual abuse in the wizarding community, and almost always accompany them, rather than stand alone."

"My parents never touched me like that," said Harry savagely.

"It's all right," Madam Shiverwood murmured. "I know they didn't. But it does mean that I'm going to be helping you heal most of the time, Harry, rather than a Healer."

Harry frowned at her. Somehow, he hadn't expected this, though he thought he was prepared for everything. To give testimony on the abuse, yes. But why did she want to change the way he thought?

Because she thinks this kind of thinking is wrong. They all think that, he realized in resignation. Well, he would just have to keep showing them how much he had healed, how it no longer hurt him to tell the truth, until they believed it.

"I want you to try indulging at least a few whims and pleasures," said Madam Shiverwood. "No more than one a day. But do that, Harry. Think of something you want, something ordinary and small, and fetch it. Or encounter a physically pleasant situation and try to enjoy it for its own sake, rather than as a pleasure for someone else or something to be endured."

Harry concealed a groan. Therapy. Great. But he nodded obediently.

Madam Shiverwood smiled at him. "Thank you, Harry," she said. "I've rarely seen such courage and such honesty. I look forward to speaking with you again."

Harry hesitated as he stood, then decided he might as well ask. He wasn't sure when he would meet with Madam Shiverwood again, and he couldn't guess the answer from how this meeting had gone. "Madam?"

She glanced up at him from marking a piece of paper that looked like a list.

"Do you think that my parents and Dumbledore will be executed?"

Madam Shiverwood clucked her tongue. "Who told you that, child?"

"I learned that execution is a common punishment for child abuse," said Harry impatiently. He was not a child, and it was unfortunate that he was giving her that impression, because it wasn't how he really felt. He would have to work on that. "What do you think, madam?"

Madam Shiverwood sighed. "Your father was a good man, once," she murmured. "A famous Auror. I had a bit of a crush on him myself. And your mother defied the Dark Lord at his side. And of course everyone knows Albus Dumbledore's legend. I know it's hard to credit that they could fall this far. But at this point, Mr. Potter? I really don't know what the Wizengamot might do to them."

With that, Harry had to be content, and he slipped out of the room to find Narcissa.

She wasn't alone when Harry did find her. Harry paused and tried to recognize the woman who talked to her, matching her up with several potential pictures in his mind. He couldn't make her fit any of them, though.

She had long golden hair, with a ripple of deeper gold in the middle, as though someone had held her head in a vat of molten metal. Her eyes were large, and so blue that Harry could see them from several feet away. She wore a gown rather than a robe, fringed with white lace. At her side stood a lean hound made of jewels, shifting and scratching itself with a tingle of magic and a jingle of sapphires.

Harry moved forward slowly, vaguely alarmed when it became clear that the witch was questioning Narcissa on his living with them, and Narcissa was explaining more about the specifics of the child abuse case—not much, just what had been in the newspapers already, but Harry had no idea why she was telling even that much.

The stranger noticed him first, and turned towards him with a fierce smile. Harry blinked. He had thought there was a fang in her mouth for a moment, as he would have expected to see in Elfrida's, but wasn't that impossible? A *puellaris* witch would not have approached a stranger the way this woman must have approached Narcissa, and she would have a husband somewhere close to her.

"Harry Potter," said a voice that had obviously been trained to piercing softness, like Elfrida's. Harry's puzzlement grew as she clasped his hand. "My name is Laura Gloryflower."

Harry had heard of the Gloryflowers, a Light pureblood family who often made magical animals out of materials like metal or jewels. They were responsible for the original creation of the voting owls that helped in the elections for Minister. That explained the hound, at least. It didn't explain Laura's unusual boldness.

Narcissa seemed to notice his floundering, and came to the rescue. "Harry, Mrs. Gloryflower was trained as a *puellaris* witch, but her husband died in the Dark Lord's War," she said. "She had to take over the family."

Harry blinked, and tried to imagine what a witch who was forced to confront the world after hiding from it all her life might do. She might crumple. On the other hand, if she adapted and confronted it head on...

He swallowed at the thought of the ferocity that could entail.

"Why did you want to meet me, Mrs. Gloryflower?" he asked, hoping it was not for the reason that had just darted into his mind.

"Because you are a child, and you have suffered," said Laura, dashing his hopes. "So I came to offer my help. I had no way to meet

you, until I realized that of course you must come to the Ministry at some point and speak with Madam Shiverwood, as all abused children do. So I came here, and asked until I found someone willing to tell me the date and time.”

Harry bristled in spite of himself. “I thought they weren’t supposed to give that kind of information out.”

“Oh, they’re not,” said Laura. “But being pinned to the wall with a lioness breathing in one’s face tends to intimidate most people.” This time, her head flickered with the shadow of a cat’s head, and she looked immensely satisfied with herself.

I don’t think I like her, Harry thought. “Mrs. Gloryflower, I do appreciate your good intentions, but—“

“I also came to propose a formal alliance with you,” Laura continued. “My family was allied to Albus Dumbledore, but he is a disgusting wizard whom I want nothing to do with again.” She said “disgusting” in the tone that other witches might have used for much stronger adjectives. “Therefore, we would like to follow you.”

Harry set his feet as best he could. He didn’t want her help if it was only based on his being an abused child. “Are you sure that this won’t split your family, Mrs. Gloryflower? The only other Light pureblood family with ties to Dumbledore that I’m aware of, the Starrises, are sharply divided on the issue of allying with me.” “Sharply divided” was a bit of an understatement, from what Tybalt had told Harry about his uncle Augustus.

“Oh, no,” said Laura, sounding quite sure. “They do what I tell them to.”

I bet they do, Harry thought uneasily.

“I suppose I don’t understand what basis you have for thinking I’d be any better,” he said bluntly. “So, yes, your training might tell you to protect me, but there are plenty of other abused children you could protect. And I have more Dark allies than Light ones right now. You must know that. So why do you think you should fit in?”

“Harry,” Narcissa chided him.

“Sometimes, you are rude,” said Argutus. “I can tell that you’re being rude from the way you smell.”

“Because I want to,” said Laura. “Part of it is to do with family honor. We followed Dumbledore for so long that I can’t help feeling we’re tainted by the association with him. Part of it is wanting to be a part of the wizarding world’s future. My family has never led, as such, but we’ve always been there—sometimes as lieutenants, sometimes as supporters, but there. We recognize change and we accept its inevitability. I’m also capable of studying evidence, and I don’t think I’m stupid. You may have stronger Dark than Light associations, but that doesn’t make you either. You haven’t Declared for Dark. That, to me, says that you will welcome Light allies, and won’t use them for puppets.” Laura cocked her head, and Harry had the feeling she had flattened her ears and lashed her tail, too, never mind that she currently didn’t have ears or a tail. “So. Here I am.”

Harry blinked again. Not even Ignifer had been this direct.

Well, it might have something to do with her being Light, and not invested in twisting every tiny meaning out of every word she can, he thought at last. Laura went on looking at him expectantly, and Harry nodded. “If you think that you can accept the terms of formal alliance—“

“Oh, a formal family alliance? No,” said Laura, decisively. “I don’t want to swear never to hurt a member of your family. I don’t think it’s a good idea. If one of them fights you, the Gloryflowers have to be able to protect you. And if one of my family did turn against you, though they’d be idiots to do it, I would want you to be able to hurt them back. So. A different kind of alliance. I was thinking an Unbreakable Vow. Shall we have your adopted mother serve as a Bonder?”

“I don’t like Unbreakable Vows,” said Harry, determined to have some control over the developing alliance.

Laura nodded cheerfully. "Then I'll write you at some point in the future, and arrange things to both our satisfaction." She smiled at Narcissa. "Mrs. Malfoy has been kind enough to invite me to the Manor with the rest of your allies, pending your approval of our joining you, and at that point, we'll ally in front of everyone. I think everything should be done as much in the open as possible. I'm not good at deception or subterfuge. Gloryflowers leave that up to other people. I'll see you then, with your approval, Mr. Potter?" She paused.

Harry studied her face. He would be a fool to reject what seemed to be a sincere alliance merely because he didn't like the family matriarch thinking of him as a child. Unwillingly, he nodded.

"Good." Laura stooped and kissed him on the cheek before he could protest, pausing and smiling when she saw Argutus. "An Omen snake," she said. "Now I think this alliance even more favorable than I did before."

She swept away, the jeweled hound padding at her side. Harry stared after her.

"Talking to her makes me tired," Narcissa admitted after a moment of silence. "Laura Gloryflower is—a force."

"I don't see how a puellaris witch can do that," said Harry, and knew he sounded plaintive.

"She thinks of the whole world as her children." Narcissa shrugged. "But if one child wrongs another, she takes the part of the wronged child." She caught a glimpse of his expression, and smiled at him. "Don't worry, Harry. It is not unique to you."

Harry didn't respond. He had caught a glimpse of someone coming up the hall behind Narcissa, and it seemed as though every muscle in his body had stiffened. He could feel his face tensing up, his mouth working into a snarl.

Snape halted a few feet down the corridor and watched in silence.

Harry moved his jaw enough to knock loose a few words, at last. "What are you doing here?"

"As your guardian," said Snape, his voice quiet, "they told me when Madam Shiverwood would interview you." He studied Harry, and Harry could almost feel the words that he longed to speak, bubbling between them. But those would only be more of the words that had existed in the letters, and thus useless to say.

Harry struggled against the growing pressure of his rage, Argutus hissing in displeasure as the air around him chilled. He shouldn't hate what Snape had done this much. If he could forgive his parents, why not Snape? He should just reconcile with him, distantly and coldly, and go on his way. He could hold his tongue in more trying circumstances. He had no reason to speak now.

But two things made what Snape had done unforgivable to Harry: he had hurt other people, and, specifically, had filed charges that endangered other people's lives. Harry could understand Dumbledore and his parents being brought to trial on non-fatal charges. That they might be executed was unthinkable.

And, as much as he hated to admit it, the second reason was rooted in his own love for Snape. He could forgive his parents and Dumbledore because they didn't matter that much to him. But for someone he so valued to do this, to threaten other people with death in a situation other than battle, and refuse to understand why Harry might want to let them live...

Harry only realized he had lost the fight against his emotions a moment after he began to speak.

"Why do you keep thinking I'm going to change my mind? I'm not. Yes, they might go to prison, but they can't die. And I didn't even know that they might until I started investigating the trial procedures. You must have known from the beginning. Yet you condemned them anyway, with charges that you knew would lead to their deaths and their long slow suffering in public beforehand. Why?"

Snape's face, which had been haggard and pale, tightened. "Because they must be stopped," he said. "Not merely given a slap on the wrist. And a slap on the wrist is all you would have given them, Harry."

"Not true." The words felt dragged up from the depths of his throat. "I could have stopped them."

"Not this way. Not permanently." Snape took a step forward, cocking his head. "And that's the difference between us, Harry. You try to give an equal measure of protection to both victims and offenders, and when their crimes are against you, you would forgive them completely. I will not see that happen. I will insure that you have as much justice as anyone else would."

Harry shook his head and turned away. He had regained control of himself. He should not have started speaking in the first place, he thought. He knew what Snape believed. There were no surprises to be had here.

"I'd like to go back to the Manor now, Mrs. Malfoy," he said.

Narcissa hesitated for a long moment, but then seemed to come to a decision. "Severus," she said, with a little bow of her head, and then escorted Harry down the hall, a hand on his shoulder.

Harry bowed his head and tried to tell himself that he didn't feel anything at all.

"You smell of pain," said Argutus. "Do you do that often? And do you smell as often of determination to endure the pain?"

Snape leaned on the wall, his eyes tracking Harry's movements. He had not realized what a shock it would be to him, to see Harry walking about without the glamour of his left hand, and, seemingly, a few inches taller than he had been when he left Hogwarts. Harry's eyes were clear and determined, and even his voice, choked with rage, had been stronger than Snape expected it to be.

His words should have struck home. They should have hurt.

They did not. Not particularly.

His last letter had made Snape come as close as he could to thinking that what he had done was wrong. It rang with steely conviction that Harry would triumph, and made him seem driven entirely by principles, as if he had let all emotion about the case drop by the wayside.

Seeing Harry in person told a different story. He had needed his parents and Dumbledore brought to justice, whether or not he would acknowledge it. Snape had observed him in silence for a few moments before he approached, and seen how easy it was for Laura Gloryflower to overwhelm him. He had been dazed from his interview with Madam Shiverwood. He was well on the road to healing, it seemed, but not there yet.

No matter what he thinks.

And he had let himself slip into an argument with Snape instead of ignoring him completely. That alone said that Snape was important enough to him that he couldn't debate rationally.

I still matter to him. This is not entirely a debate of principles.

Snape folded the hope up, put it in his pocket, and returned to Hogwarts a good deal more cheerful than he had felt for the last month.

Chapter Twelve: A Sound of Many Voices

Harry dreamed.

This time, he didn't have the odd cloudiness that had marked his vision of the attack on the Burrow. Harry found himself rather grateful for that as he crouched in his lynx shape on the floor of a cave he hadn't yet seen, and watched Bellatrix carving wood in front of him. She did it mostly with magic, but now and then she would slice a knife across a piece of wood. Harry didn't try to see what she was making. Instead, he turned and faced Voldemort.

The Dark Lord was speaking with someone else, whom Harry couldn't see until he shifted a bit to the side. Fenrir Greyback crouched in front of Voldemort, his head bowed and his long shaggy hair hanging over his face. He was saying, "...don't think that most of them will have any objection, my lord."

"Excellent." Harry wondered how the sibilance that had never troubled him in the voices of Argutus, Sylarana, or the Many could sound so ugly in Voldemort's. "Then travel to your kindred, Fenrir. Summon them to me when the moon grows full again."

Greyback bowed his head once more, and then turned and slipped towards the entrance of the cave. Harry saw a stir of motion where the dimness gave way to light. He suspected it was Cynthia Whitecheek, Greyback's consort and a new Death Eater, who had devoured a small boy in the graveyard while Harry watched.

He shuddered at the reminder, and crept into the shadows as Voldemort turned to Bellatrix. He didn't think that his enemy could sense him, or he would have attacked Harry by now, but he didn't know how these visions might have changed since Voldemort's resurrection, and he was in no mood for a head-on confrontation.

"Bella." Voldemort hissed her name, too, though with no sibilants in it, that didn't seem possible. "How goes your carving?"

"Almost finished, my lord," said Bellatrix, and went on chanting in a language that Harry didn't think was Latin. Voldemort watched her for

some time, reaching out absently to stroke the head of the queen basilisk, who had slithered up beside him. Harry crouched further at the sight of her, but the snake didn't turn around. She merely coiled lazily at her master's feet and let the set of false eyelids that kept her gaze from killing fall over her eyes.

"Done, my lord," said Bellatrix abruptly.

Voldemort released a harsh laugh, and put out one white hand to take the collection of wooden circles that Bellatrix handed him. Harry squinted, but couldn't make out much about them. They were small, perhaps the size of Sickles, and they had elaborate carvings; that much he was sure of. But when he shifted to the side, Voldemort had scooped them so close to his chest that his fingers and robes entirely concealed them. Harry uttered a little growl, then remembered the basilisk and froze. She still didn't turn towards him, though.

"What should I tell them, my lord?" Bellatrix stood, her single hand, the one she had stolen from Harry, brushing at her robes. Her full attention was on Voldemort's face, despite the presence of a dark hole at her back Harry thought he saw the darkness in the hole ripple, and shivered.

"That we come up from beneath on the autumnal equinox," Voldemort whispered, never looking away from the wooden circles in his hand. "That my breeding of basilisks proceeds apace, and they may count on their help if they have trouble. That we will strike at the Muggles where they least expect it." He choked out a high, cold laugh that Harry had not missed at all, though it had been some time since he had last heard it. "Go, Bellatrix. This is the greatest plan of Lord Voldemort since his rising!"

"My lord," Bellatrix murmured, and strode around the brink of the hole, moving out of range of Harry's vision.

Voldemort laid the wooden circles on the ground, and Harry promptly inched forward to get a glimpse of the design on them. To his disappointment, it was nothing recognizable, only a tangled network of lines. Yes, they might mean something, but so might almost any random tracing if looked at with the right eyes.

Voldemort laughed, then, and touched the neck of the basilisk at his feet. “Come,” he said in Parseltongue, and she lifted her head and gazed up at him with uttermost devotion. Harry winced. Of course, the Dark Lord must have told his pet not to hurt him, either. “I will breed you a mate.”

He turned away. Harry debated staying and witnessing the birth of this second basilisk, but he doubted that it would add anything to what he already knew. He had much more important information to provide to his allies: what sounded like notice of a major attack, and on the day when, of course, the balance between light and darkness would shift toward darkness—the day last year when Voldemort had yanked Regulus out of his head.

He pushed against the barriers of the dream until they split, this time becoming almost like the clouds of the last vision, and then tumbled back into his body.

Narcissa never had restricted his getting up early, and Harry had risen before the sun did and spent nearly half an hour pacing his bedroom. Both the pain and the amount of blood from his scar had been small, so he could concentrate on what “up from beneath” might mean.

Tunnels. Well, yes, tunnels, that’s obvious, but where? I don’t think there are that many tunnels under Hogwarts. Harry sighed, longing for a moment for the Marauder’s Map, which he had not seen since Voldemort in Sirius’s body had stolen it, along with his other maps, at the end of third year. But maybe I’m misremembering. And where would he want to attack but Hogwarts?

Then Harry halted, and drummed a hand against his forehead hard enough to make himself stagger.

He talked about Muggles, Harry, not wizards. He’s going to attack Muggles. And the basilisks would certainly fit, since they could slither through tunnels and squeeze out of unexpected places. Isn’t there a system of tunnels under London? At least, I think there is. Harry had to admit that he wasn’t that conversant with most aspects of the

Muggle world, but he was sure that he had heard his mother mention the “London Underground” once or twice. He bit his lip, wondering who would be the best person to ask for advice on that.

As if one insight had sparked another, it didn’t take him nearly as long to come to the right conclusion this time. Griselda Marchbanks knows the southern goblins, and they know the tunnels under some parts of London, at least. They could probably figure out what portions connect to the Muggle ones and which would be in most danger. I’ll write a letter to Madam Marchbanks immediately.

Harry did that, describing his reasons for believing that Voldemort was coming through the Underground. He hesitated for a long moment over letting Madam Marchbanks know about his visions, but in the end, he decided there was no other way to go about it. She wouldn’t trust the word of Evan Rosier, not hardly, and it was absolutely imperative that Voldemort’s attack on the Muggles be prevented. At least they had almost two months to prepare for it.

When the letter was complete, Harry hesitated again, and then called for Fawkes. The phoenix appeared with a soft warble of complaint, and ostentatiously checked his shoulders, head tilted to the side as he hovered.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Argutus is still asleep in the bed, Fawkes,” he said. “And he’s never bothered you, anyway.” He found it odd that the phoenix, by so much the older and wiser of the two creatures, was the one who was having more trouble adapting to the situation.

Fawkes flicked out a trill that Harry knew meant basically the same thing as, “Hmmmph!” but settled on the bedside table and let Harry attach the letter to his leg. He vanished in a tiny ball of flames the moment Harry told him that the letter was destined for Madam Marchbanks.

“Why are you over there?”

Harry went back to the bed, and extended his right arm down for Argutus. The Omen snake, resting in the warmth of the depression he’d created in the bed, only looked back at him. His eyes shone with

calmness. Harry could not decide if it came from natural serenity or a lack of knowledge about the world.

A moment later, he realized why Argutus wasn't moving, and put his left arm down. Argutus coiled happily about his left wrist, and Harry turned towards the door.

"You never answered me about why you were over there," said Argutus, looping a coil of his body around Harry's throat so that he could stay on for the ride.

"Attending to Fawkes," Harry said as he trotted down the stairs, wondering who he should speak to first. Narcissa, he decided. From the quiet in the downstairs rooms, Draco was still asleep, and Lucius would have next to no say in the decisions Harry now wanted made. Narcissa was the natural contact person for the rest of his allies, too. Even Laura Gloryflower had spoken first to her. "He doesn't want to come and sleep in the bed anymore, now that you're there."

"I would not eat him. He is too big. Can I have crickets for breakfast?"

Harry ignored the question as he opened the door to the morning parlor and found Narcissa there. She put down the Daily Prophet she was reading and stood at once, her face pale but courteous. "Harry. Has something happened?"

"I've just had another vision," said Harry. He told the details to her, as neatly and sparingly as he had related them in the letter to Madam Marchbanks. He didn't want Narcissa fussing over this, especially because he was about to ask her for a favor.

Narcissa smiled slightly. "A good thing that I was planning to send letters to most of your allies today anyway, reminding them of certain obligations they are committed to," she murmured. "And what else do you want me to do, Harry?"

Harry blinked. "Is it that obvious?"

"Written all over your face."

Harry nodded, deciding that he would worry about it later. “We should visit Grimmauld Place. Anything else there that’s a weapon, or even useful knowledge, should be gathered up, and we should start preparing the house as a base. I know that we said we’d do that, but we haven’t so far.”

“You know why, Harry,” said Narcissa, in a motherly way. “You’ve been—indisposed, and there were other things to worry about. I still don’t think that going outside the wards is safe for you.”

“I’m going to ask Regulus to lower the wards on Number Twelve for us, so that we can Apparate directly to the house,” said Harry. “Then we’ll be inside the wards there, and we should be able to get back here before anyone else notices us, don’t you think?” Regulus hadn’t been in his head much lately—the closer McGonagall got to re-Transfiguring his body, the more time Regulus found himself obliged to spend in the little wooden dog—but Harry reached out for him now. Regulus?

There was a long moment of silence, and then Regulus answered, voice weary. Yes, Harry?

Would you lower the wards around Grimmauld Place for us? Voldemort is preparing for his first major strike in this war, I think, and we need all the weapons and knowledge we can get.

Regulus took another long moment to answer, but his tone was warmer when he did. Of course, Harry. It’s done. It might not take that bitch Bellatrix long to notice, though, so please go quickly.

Of course. Harry opened his eyes and smiled at Narcissa. “The wards are down. Can we please go?”

Narcissa frowned and tapped her wand against her palm. Harry could see her weighing the risks in her mind.

“Why couldn’t I go there alone?” she asked, as Harry had expected she would.

"I can strengthen the house with my own magic," Harry said calmly. "There's one particular technique I used to ward my parents' old house at Godric's Hollow when I was there that would work especially well. And, of course, I might see something valuable that you don't recognize, even though you're of the Black bloodline. I've had training in that kind of thing."

Narcissa considered some more. Harry sat on his impatience, and put it behind steel bars. Yes, he wanted to go quickly, so as not to risk Bellatrix getting in, but Bellatrix was busy informing Voldemort's allies of his plan, and at least this waiting would have better consequences than some of the hasty actions he'd come up with last year. He was being an adult, and mature, and responsible, in consulting his allies. He knew he was.

At last, Narcissa nodded. "Let me send the letters, and then I will accompany you, Harry," she said.

"Excellent," Harry said, and couldn't stop his satisfied smile, nor the foot he tapped on the floor until Narcissa was finished. He did somewhat soothe his impatience by answering Argutus's questions about owls, and the rustling things humans attached to them, and why people would eat things other than crickets for breakfast.

Harry heard the song the moment he entered the house at Grimmauld Place. This time, it even overrode the surprisingly cordial greetings of the portrait of Capella Black in his ears.

Let me free. Let me go. I am meant to be free. We are meant to be free, in the manner of other creatures that you have loosed. Wake me, vates. Wake us, unbinder.

Harry was halfway up the stairs before he realized what was happening. Narcissa's hand came down on his shoulder, and then she cast a spell that Harry didn't recognize, but which made the song cease. He realized after a moment that she hadn't cast a spell to end the song, which might be impossible, but to muffle all sound from reaching his ears.

Narcissa lifted a brow and traced glowing red letters in the air with a wand. I am sorry to do this, Harry, but after how close that creature came to snaring you last time, I think it better to take no chances.

Harry nodded shakily. The creature trapped upstairs at Grimmauld Place was unique in his experience—something that fed only on the magic of powerful wizards, and which only an average one was able to bind or contain. Its song was the subtlest form of compulsion he had ever encountered, far stronger than Dumbledore's. Even when he thought he was free from it, it twined about his mind in silver strands and dragged his thoughts to its own purpose. The only things Harry knew about it other than that were the location of the door it was trapped behind and the sound of many legs scrambling together that he'd heard when he ventured to that door last time they were in the house.

He found it hard to ignore a magical creature's appeal to him in the name of vates, but he knew the consequences of unleashing that creature would be neither moral nor ethical. Besides, Narcissa was keeping a close eye on him, and had already traced the words I'll take the higher floors in the air.

Harry nodded sheepishly, and waited until she was up the stairs before he closed his eyes. Last time, he had come to Grimmauld Place specifically to look for Regulus. With him found now, Harry had a compelling motivation to look in other ways.

He could sense other people's magic, when he grew sufficiently familiar with them; he knew some of the characteristics of Draco's power, and Snape's, and James's and Connor's power had caused him fits last summer when he found it pressing on him in Lux Aeterna, leaving him unable to concentrate. Now, for the first time, he relaxed and tried to sense any trace of weaknesses in the wards of Grimmauld Place, or any unusually powerful magic. Perhaps it would lead him to something that Narcissa had overlooked, or something hidden in a place she'd never known about. Technically speaking, though Narcissa was of the Black line, she wouldn't be its heir unless both Regulus and Bellatrix died.

He gasped when he felt an old, odd echo of a familiar presence almost at once, dark and foreboding. And then it changed, and turned gray in his mind, overlaid with melancholy so strong that tears were burning his eyes when he opened them.

Harry let out a breath, and went slowly towards the kitchen. The portrait of Capella Black was probably still murmuring greetings and welcome. Harry didn't care. He walked through the kitchen as if he were dreaming, and then reached out and laid his hand on a portion of the wall that looked no different from all the rest.

A ward sparked softly at him. Harry hesitated, and wondered what he would have to do to get through it.

But even as he waited, the ward stopped sparking. Harry looked down to see a snake of light coiling around his hand. The silver tongue flickered out, touched the back of his wrist once, and then vanished, along with the rest of the serpent. Harry shivered, wondering which one of the mingled presences here had left the ward, and which the snake had recognized him as tied to.

The wall folded neatly out in a panel. Inside was a space about the size of a cupboard. Harry's chest tightened when he saw the familiar sheaf of paper on the top shelf, and he reached out and clasped it.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," he said.

Nothing happened. Harry snorted, then reached into his pocket, levitating the map in the air, and drew out his wand. A touch of the wand and a whisper of the words worked, and he watched the familiar lines of the Marauder's Map race across the parchment. His chest ached fiercely for a moment. Voldemort, in Sirius's body, must have come here just after he'd stolen the maps and hidden them in a place he had reason to believe only he would have access to. Or perhaps he had sent Kreacher, the Blacks' old house elf, to bring them here.

For a moment, even though he knew he shouldn't feel it, a surge of fierce satisfaction coiled in Harry's heart. He'd destroyed Kreacher in the confrontation with Voldemort at the end of his third year, and he

could not feel that bad about the death. It had been a just return for the danger the elf had caused both him and Draco during the year, and might have gone on causing them if he'd lived.

He looked up from the Marauder's Map, at the second shelf of the hidden cupboard. A Pensieve sat there, and Harry's chest tightened for a different reason this time. He'd had some bad experiences with Pensieves in the past. And considering who had last touched this cupboard, he wondered about whose memories this one might hold.

Inevitably, of course, he had to reach out, draw the Pensieve forth into the light, and carry it over to set on the kitchen table. It was brimful of silvery thoughts. Harry hesitated for a long moment before he lowered his head and plunged it into the liquid.

Almost at once he found himself in a dim place. He looked around, and, with a little shock, recognized the meadow at Godric's Hollow. His younger self was sprawled with a large book in one corner of the lawn, of course, and Connor and James were flying a kite in another. It was a scene Harry had seen several times in his own memories. But he knew it happened on a sunny day. A Pensieve memory, even filtered through Sirius's perspective, should have retained that light. Instead, it looked as though a murky gray mist had covered everything.

He understood after a moment's consideration, and after turning and seeing Sirius behind him, gaze desperate and haunted. Pensieves showed only the objective truth. This was the way things had really looked on that particular day; it was Harry's own memory that was false. The presence of Voldemort was in the back of Sirius's mind even then, though not the same piece of it that had controlled him just before his death. Evil magic slithered under the wards and tainted the air with its slime. And under Sirius's thoughts were the pained screams of Regulus. He had lived with his brother's torture in his head for twelve years. Everyone else, of course, thinking Regulus dead, had believed those were only nightmares.

Harry pulled his head out of the Pensieve, and closed his eyes. A surge of pity and renewed grief for his godfather touched him. Sirius had betrayed his friends and Connor and Harry near the end, but that

was after more than a decade of fighting against Voldemort's mental pressures, suffering torture secondhand, and suffering from the guilt that sending Peter to Azkaban and claiming his brother was dead had caused. That he had broken only then, and kept on fighting to the point that Voldemort had to fight back to claim his mind, bespoke enormous strength. His greatest faults had been the pride and the guilt that wouldn't let him tell anyone the truth, not weakness.

Harry gently levitated the Pensieve into the air, and floated it behind him, along with the Marauder's Map, as he went towards the front door. He could sense the weaknesses in the wards more easily if he were just outside the house's magic, he thought.

I'm not going to forget you, Sirius, he thought, even as he worked to link Protego charms together and hang them around the house. What happened to you should never have to happen to anyone. Thank you for reminding me of part of the reason that I'm fighting Voldemort. And I'll look through the memories in the Pensieve, too, when I can bear to. Your life shouldn't go unshared any more.

Despite the tears he'd shed earlier, Harry felt stronger and more centered than he had since the interview with Madam Shiverwood. There was ground he was still uncertain on and must trip over when he walked—the ground of his healing was one patch, where every step he took seemed to be wrong, and to require ten more—but with defensive magic and what he was most committed to, he could dance. Harry returned to Malfoy Manor a little more hopeful than when he'd left it. He'd almost completely re-warded the house at Grimmauld Place, with some lines of defense that were keyed specifically to him and would yield otherwise only to Regulus—since he was the Blacks' heir, nothing Harry could do to the property would ultimately override his will. Narcissa had found a few more objects that might be weapons, and several books hidden in the walls. The song of the creature had not bothered him again. All in all, Harry thought, they might manage to launch this war on firm footing after all.

Then he entered his room, and saw Draco waiting with a set face, and saw the pile of letters on the table next to his bed. Harry hesitated, glanced at Draco, and waited.

Draco said nothing, simply stared at him. Harry decided to deal with the letters first. He picked up the first one and turned his back to Draco, frowning at the handwriting on the envelope. It looked familiar, but he couldn't remember where he'd seen it. Likewise, the letter at first afforded him no clues.

August 7th, 1995

Dear Harry:

I'm sorry that it took me so long to write you. I had no idea what to say. And then I realized that was stupid, because this is a letter to you and not a three-foot essay for Professor Snape, so I sat down and just started writing.

I mean—it's not that I don't think you're important. Of course I do. But I think you'll still forgive me if I say something stupid or wrong.

I'm so sorry for what you suffered at the hands of your parents. I really should have seen the signs of it, but I didn't. If you want books about it, just ask me, and I'll be happy to owl them to you. And of course I'll be happy to bring you books about it when we come back to school, too. I saw the announcement in the Prophet yesterday that the trial wouldn't be until the sixteenth of November. It'll feel like forever, I know.

And there I am, making pompous declarations again. I'm sorry. This is the kind of thing that comes out when I try to write a spontaneous, emotional letter.

I especially want to apologize for believing in Professor Dumbledore so much. I thought he must be wonderful, since he was in so many books and he had such an enlightened attitude about Muggleborns like me. But then I heard what he did, and...just because you have enlightened attitudes doesn't make you a good person. I'm so sorry, Harry. I hope you can forgive me for believing in him like I did.

I don't know how to end this, so I'm just ending it.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger.

Harry closed his eyes. He didn't have any suspicions of Hermione, that she was only saying this to make herself look good or somehow get into his good opinion, or that she had some stake in making him admit that he'd been abused. That made her different from everyone else who'd tried to interview or write him. She deserved a careful, thought-out response that he would make later. He set her letter gently aside, and opened the next one.

This one had an actual seal on it, one bearing a cup in yellow wax. Harry frowned when he saw it, and again when he saw the handwriting—only vaguely familiar, though who was writing it became clear sooner.

August 6th, 1995

To Harry Potter, elder son and by all rights heir of the Potter family, balancer between Light and Dark, from Zacharias Smith, heir of the Smith line, last descendants of Helga Hufflepuff, Declared for Light.

I am writing to express my formal sympathies for your abuse, and for the current undignified way it is being played out in the papers. If there is anything I can do for one who has emerged from such tainted heritage so nobly shining, do not hesitate to let me know.

My Declaration for Light was a month ago, as I turned fifteen at that time, and my family holds to the older view of wizarding adulthood. As heir of my family, I have access to a good deal of money, and some small political capital that I intend to increase. For what good it might do, I am also Helga Hufflepuff's heir. All of this, or any other form of aid that you desire, may be asked for.

Sincerely,

Zacharias Smith.

Harry blinked as he laid that letter down, and only partly at Smith's pomposity. He had heard, years ago, of a witch named Hepzibah Smith who was Hufflepuff's heir—the last formally acknowledged as such, since the cup that was the last of Hufflepuff's heirlooms vanished after her death. Harry didn't know if being a Founder's heir carried any weight now, but at least he had it on his side if it did.

He had to admit that Zacharias's offer of monetary aid was even more tempting. Harry had no idea of what he was going to do for money if he exceeded the small store of Galleons that James had left for him in a personal vault at Gringotts. He wasn't the officially acknowledged Potter heir, no matter what Zacharias said, and so he had access neither to the main Potter vault nor any money that might be at Lux Aeterna. He would have to use his Galleons on his books and robes and other supplies for this year. At least Lily and James had paid for both he and Connor to attend Hogwarts in advance.

The last letter had handwriting that was very familiar, but not writing that Harry had ever expected to see again. His heart began to pound crazily as he read it.

Potter:

Please, please help me. Dad's gone crazy since the Dark Lord returned. He wants me to kill for him, and I don't want to. This note is dangerous, and I don't care. It's the first chance I've had to write all summer. Next year he wants me to attend Durmstrang, and then I'll be out of reach from you.

Please, help me somehow.

Vincent Crabbe.

Harry didn't stop to think, with this one. He drew out a sheet of parchment from his bedside table and scribbled as fast as he could, to try and keep up with his racing thoughts.

Dear Vince:

Hi. I was worried about you. I haven't heard from you in so long. How have you been?

I've been kind of bored this summer, with only Draco to talk to. I'd like to see the other Slytherin students, too, like you and Blaise. Could you meet me in Diagon Alley on the fourteenth of August? That's the day I'm going shopping for school supplies. I should be there between ten and eleven in the morning, and I'll probably stay for several hours. I'd love to talk with you.

Hope to see you soon,

Harry.

Harry folded the note and carried it over to Hedwig's perch, which was in the corner of his room nearest the window. She sat up and ruffled her feathers as she saw him, obviously noting the urgency of his stride.

"Carry this for me, girl," Harry murmured, levitating the twine that he needed to bind the letter firmly on without a second thought. "It needs to go to Vincent Crabbe, and it needs to go as soon as possible. Wait for a reply."

Hedwig gave an important hoot, and then swooped out. Harry clenched his hand and watched her dwindle in the sky, hoping against hope that Vince would understand his words. Harry didn't think it likely that a letter from Harry Potter would escape detection by Mr. Crabbe, and, in fact, he didn't want it to. The whole point was to let him know that Harry Potter was going to be in Diagon Alley on the morning of the fourteenth of August, and that he would be looking to meet his son there.

Harry had to get Vince close to him to help him, and he thought this was the best way to do so. Yes, he was using himself as bait in a trap, but it wasn't going to be a sacrifice. If everything went well, no one would even be wounded. Yes, Crabbe might pass the letter, and thus the privilege of killing Harry, on to someone else, but whoever else came would still have to escort Vince, to allay suspicion, and no one else would do that like his own father. If Harry didn't see Vince at all,

Mr. Crabbe would think, he would have no problem simply Apparating out if someone tried to kill him. All that speculation rode on Vince's letter having escaped his father's detection, but then, so did Vince's plea for help.

Harry considered the risk that he might have to deal with multiple Death Eaters. He accepted it. Vince's situation was currently several degrees more desperate than his own, especially since Harry had no idea where the Crabbes lived, and, while he might possibly be able to pass letters on to Vince at Durmstrang if the Rosier-Henlin children would agree to it, it would be much harder to actually remove him from the school.

"Now will you talk to me?"

Startled, Harry turned around, and found that Draco's face had gone more and more stone-like. He blinked. "You didn't seem to want to talk to me," he said. "So I waited. Was that the wrong decision?"

"Yes." Draco bit off the word. "The monitoring spell told me that you'd left the house, Harry, but not in time for me to stop you, because you were Apparating. You should have come and told me."

Harry blinked again. "I went with your mother, Draco."

"You still should have told me."

Harry braced himself. He'd thought he would hit one of these fences with his allies sooner or later, but he could have wished for anyone other than Draco to experience it with. Still and all, it was here, and he would have to face it. "I agreed to the monitoring spell because it was the punishment you wanted to impose," he said quietly. "I never said I thought it was a good idea."

Clouds moved across Draco's face, and then settled and darkened into a thunderhead. "You were humoring me?"

"Yes."

Draco shook his head. "This is something I've been meaning to discuss with you anyway, Harry," he said. "I don't feel that you give me enough. You do what I want only when it isn't really inconvenient. You never give me something just because you want to give it to me, other than birthday and Christmas gifts. I've given you an awful lot." He leaned forward and stared into Harry's eyes. "I don't even know if you're really in love with me, even though I've taken the risk of telling you that I am with you."

Harry waited. He expected to feel resentment or anger building in him.

Instead, he felt the same strange excitement he'd experienced the other day when Draco had said he would push Harry more, and he smiled. Draco stared at him, looking caught off balance, and then annoyed for having been caught off balance.

"I'm glad that you've decided to push," said Harry. "It'll make things more honest. And the last thing I want ever again is a relationship where I or the other person or both of us just ignore what's lying at the bottom of it." Because of the Pensieve, his mind went first to Sirius, but then he thought about Connor, and his parents, and Dumbledore, and Snape, and even Draco sometimes, and how much trouble had come from just not saying things. "I'm glad," he repeated.

Draco reoriented himself with what looked like an effort. "I am angry with you," he said.

"Good," Harry replied. "That means that I can say that I think the monitoring spell is a silly punishment. I'm not sneaking off anymore, Draco. I've kept that promise for nearly four weeks now, and I haven't complained about it before. But if you're going to get upset every time I leave Hogwarts or the Manor without asking you, specifically, even if I'm in the company of someone else, then it's not doing either of us any good. Think of something else that you want."

Draco's eyes narrowed. "I want you to think of something that you want to give me, and then give it to me, freely."

Harry felt a tremble of possible panic. He suppressed it. Draco was doing something that Harry respected him tremendously for, and it

was the kind of challenge that Harry couldn't resist in other possible arenas. He would conquer it in this one, too. This was something he did want, no matter the obstacles in the way. He would jump them, because it was what he did.

"All right," he said. "Will you take the monitoring spell off, now?"

Draco eyed him cautiously, but drew his wand and did it without pause, to his credit. Harry sighed in relief when it was gone, though it hadn't been much more than a small chill presence he only noticed sometimes. He looked Draco in the eye when it was finished.

"When we're done walking some of the more difficult paths, you won't need something like that ever again, because I'm going to show you that you can trust me completely."

Hope like a slender ray of sunshine parted Draco's clouds. He did say, "It'll be hard."

"Good," said Harry, with a dryness he hadn't known he was capable of. "I don't know what I would do if it were easy."

And with that, Draco smiled, and Harry found his breath catching, almost in spite of himself.

But not quite.

I do, he could repeat to himself, and at the moment, the future looked as fiercely green as a summer meadow after rain. I do want this, and I'm going to fight the things that might get in my way, and I'm going to win.

No. We're going to win.

Chapter Thirteen: Securing the Tunnels

Harry relaxed when he'd read the letter once, but he couldn't quite help reading it a second time, just to make sure that everything was happening the way he'd wanted it to happen.

Dear Mr. Potter:

Given what you have told me about the attack on the London Underground, I am not inclined to discount the information. In fact, it will take relatively little to secure the tunnels from most convenient points of entrance from the wizarding world. But I would expect You-Know-Who to strike in Muggle territory itself. For persuading the goblins to take such an extra risk, your help would be extremely valuable. They feel they owe you honor, though no debt; the hanarz has been quite clear on the fact that their promise to change slowly and not inform the wizarding world at large of their freedom for some time settles that obligation. But they would at least listen, and you may be able to strike another bargain with them, to show them why they should care for Muggles at all. They expect to see you at Gringotts between the hours of eight and nine on the fourteenth of August.

Best wishes.

Griselda Marchbanks.

Harry sent back a short note, and went downstairs. He knew he was smirking. He couldn't help it. Argutus rode his shoulder, and sometimes touched his tongue to Harry's cheek, and sometimes asked what certain things they passed were and what they did. Harry told him when he thought the Omen snake could understand. It was already remarkable how much he could understand compared to two weeks ago. He even seemed to have some grasp on the nature of Harry's relationship with Draco, which was more than Harry could say about himself.

Now, he said, "You watch the pale one very often, and you smell of concern for him. Do you suspect something about him?"

Harry paused with one hand on the door of the reading room where Narcissa spent many of her evenings. "How did you know that, Argutus?" he murmured.

Argutus wound his body in a figure-eight pattern, which he'd chosen as his equivalent to a shrug after spending a whole afternoon asking about human gestures of uncertainty. "It seemed likely from the way that you look at him," he said. "And of course human scents express all kinds of information that you never think to conceal from snakes like me."

Harry nodded slowly. "I've been watching Draco because I think there's something he's not telling me," he murmured, keeping his voice low. He'd had occasion to reflect in the past few days, when he turned around and found Lucius staring at him, that there was another Parselmouth in the house. And one of the things he'd noticed from his observation was the careful, cold courtesy with which Lucius and Draco danced around each other. "But I want to figure it out on my own, and reassure him that he can tell me whatever he likes."

"Is that not true now?"

"Not yet," said Harry. "I don't think he'd believe me unless I already know what it is. This is the gift I'm giving him: showing that I know him as well as he knows me."

"Hmmm."

Harry shook his head at the snake's commentary and opened the door. Narcissa looked up at once from the letter she was writing, tense as a coiled basilisk, and then relaxed at the sight of him. "Harry," she said. "I thought—never mind. You had something that you wanted to say?"

Harry nodded. "I know that we were planning to go to Diagon Alley tomorrow anyway," he said. "Can we go a few hours earlier, though? Madam Marchbanks just sent me a letter. The southern goblins want to talk to me in Gringotts, between the hours of eight and nine."

Narcissa shook her head, and Harry's heart dipped for a moment, but then he realized it was a gesture of astonishment instead of refusal. "Only you would be able to do things like this, Harry," she said. "Yes. There are a few shops in Diagon Alley that I want to visit anyway, and I might as well do it in the cool of the morning as the heat of the afternoon."

That might be a problem, then, Harry thought, his mind working fast. If Vince is going to meet me between ten and eleven, I'll have to make sure that we stay in Diagon Alley until eleven at least.

He had not discounted the possibility that Vince's father had found out about his letter, of course. That did not matter, because Harry could handle a trap. The main thing he wanted was Vince close to him.

"I haven't been out of the Manor but a few times this summer, though," he said, and stared at the floor. "A battle, and the Ministry, and Grimmauld Place." He stared back up at her. "Can we please spend a few hours in Diagon Alley beyond that?"

Narcissa clasped one hand inside the other, a graceful gesture of worry that Harry had never seen her perform. "Is this part of the therapy that you discussed with Madam Shiverwood, Harry?" she asked.

I was supposed to do something pleasant or selfish for myself each day. It was the first time Harry had thought of the advice since he received it. But he had no intention of discarding such a useful tool as a plausible explanation.

"Well, staying in Diagon Alley a few hours longer would please me," he said. "But if you think it's too dangerous—"

Narcissa cut him off. "We can leave the moment it becomes dangerous, Harry. But the moment it becomes dangerous, do you understand?"

Harry nodded enthusiastically. It really would please him, and even though he was luring danger to him, he didn't think Narcissa would mind, because he never intended her to find out about it.

The only successful conspiracy is one that is never discovered. Lucius put the book of medical magic down on the chair beside him, and then crossed to his shelves. Most of the books on magical creatures were well-thumbed, since Harry and Draco both used them for research, but they put them back again when they were done. They knew that Lucius would not have been pleased if they did not.

Lucius's fingers drifted from spine to spine, until he found the one that interested him the most. Within: Magical Parasites. He drew it down, tapped it with his wand, and murmured the spell that would let him find the first occurrence of the word he wanted in the book.

That turned out to be only a glancing reference, so he had to search again, and then again. The third time was the lucky try. Lucius could feel his lips parting as he read, as Within confirmed what he had read in the book on medical magic. It seemed that a certain species of insect had once been used to treat the aftereffects of curses, feeding on and destroying the dangerous Dark magic. As spells had advanced to take their place, however, the Healers had gratefully abandoned them. The procedure to implant them was really most disgusting.

There was also an interesting bit of information on what they did when they were accidentally introduced into someone healthy, which Lucius read with careful attention, and then memorized.

He put the book back, and returned to his desk to write a polite letter to the Magical Menagerie. He doubted that they would have what he wanted on hand, but he would be in Diagon Alley tomorrow, and he requested the honor of an interview with the shop owner. She could surely order it for him.

He smiled as he sent that owl off, and allowed his gaze to linger on one drawer in the desk, where he had locked the return letter from Ollivander. The wand-maker had agreed to his plan. Of course, believing that he owed his life to Lucius, he had had little choice

about it. He could have resisted if he had known the truth, but Lucius had no chance of letting him find that out.

He knew the saying about successful conspiracies.

Harry entered Gringotts with more confidence than he'd felt the first time he came there, his hand resting on one pocket in his robes, but that didn't last long. A goblin he hadn't seen before, wearing a silver chain around her neck that Harry also hadn't seen before, came up and bowed to him the moment he set foot in the bank.

"Mr. Potter?" she asked. "If you will follow me now?" To most of the wizards and witches around him, Harry supposed, it would sound like the typical polite greeting. But she met his eyes defiantly, which no goblin would have done before, and she didn't offer him her name, or any courtesies once he'd nodded. She turned around and walked on, and Narcissa and Draco, who came behind Harry, found themselves engaged with two goblins who moved so smoothly to intercept them that Harry didn't realize what was happening before it was done.

Harry followed the female goblin still, allaying his own fears. It was ridiculous to think that the goblins would try to kill or harm the wizards just because they were free of their web now. It was a prejudice that Albus Dumbledore would have been proud of. He should remember that he was dealing with proud, independent, free beings now, and, moreover, ones that had suffered abuses at the hands of wizards for centuries. He would just have to live with whatever discomfort that brought him. The goblins had borne worse.

They entered the back of the bank, and here, Harry found the differences even more pronounced. The goblins who passed him had a light, brisk trot, just fast enough to get their work done without tiring them. Most of them openly wore chains of silver or bronze or gold, and sometimes a stone ornament that none of them let Harry see closely once they realized he was human. Those seemed to be pendants with seven sides. Harry had no idea what they meant.

He wondered if he would feel this out of place in Muggle London. He experienced a sudden spasm of regret that he'd never got to go. He thought it would probably be good for him.

The female goblin led him into what was recognizably a cave, rather than the meeting room he'd seen the first time. The very rock of Gringotts was transforming around them, Harry thought, as he exchanged nods with the hanarz. He wondered what it would look like when the goblins broke free of their self-imposed slow change and made the wizarding world notice them.

I hope I'm here to see it.

"Mr. Potter." The hanarz leaned forward. Strings of metal glittered and flashed on her body, woven into her clothes, and, apparently, her skin. "Tell us more details of this attack that you say is going to take place on the autumnal equinox."

Harry willingly told her every detail of the dream, including the ones that hadn't been about the attack. Perhaps the goblins would know something about the wooden circles Bellatrix had been carving, or could direct him to someone who did. And when he mentioned the tangled pattern on them, the hanarz did indeed nod wisely.

"That represents the maze of tunnels that connect our world with the London Underground," she said. "It is ancient magic, the use of wood to triumph over the stone and metal of the tunnels. It can crack them even as tree roots can crack stone. Voldemort will put one on every tunnel entrance, seeking to split any protections on them and obtain easy passage for his army."

She could suggest nothing similar for the werewolves, but Harry had already written to the three Light werewolves turned in April by Fenrir Greyback's bites, and to Hawthorn. They had promised they would try to get in contact with other werewolves, but none of them had had much contact with any packs, let alone those Greyback would speak to. Harry had written to Remus, too, but post to the Sanctuary went so slowly that he wondered if Remus would arrive before it became a non-issue. He suspected that there was little to be done about the ones who would fight in Voldemort's ranks in any case. He could not offer a cure for lycanthropy, or anything else that would interest them in him immediately. Even his ability to provide Wolfsbane Potion was limited now that he didn't have much money.

“We will help you secure the tunnels.”

Harry blinked and looked up at the hanarz. “You will?” He had expected that it would take much more arguing to get her to agree, especially since Madam Marchbanks had said that the goblins didn’t consider themselves in debt to him.

“We are capable of recognizing dangers to our own world,” said the hanarz briskly, moving around the far side of the cave, in a path that never put her closer than about ten feet to Harry. “We still share this world with wizards, though they have done us little good—one witch and one wizard excepted.” Her gaze speared Harry for a moment. “We will help you on this, though we may not on the more isolated attacks.”

“That is all I can ask for,” Harry responded as he followed her, wondering what exactly they would do. Surely securing all the tunnels will take longer than the hour she asked to meet with me?

“At least you are polite,” said the hanarz. “And you have not deceived us.” She made a sharp snap of her fingers that echoed like clicking bones and resulted in two goblins, both with stone ornaments around their necks and quivers of arrows on their backs, instantly springing up to escort them. She glanced back at once Harry. “Have you found anything that would enable you to free our northern relatives?”

Harry shook his head. Even with the Light allies he now had, he was very far from being able to convince the Light pureblood families to give up their linchpins, their ancestral homes, and as long as those linchpins stood, then the net on the northern goblins would endure.

“Pity,” said the hanarz, and then led him down into the bank, yet another set of tunnels that Harry had not seen before.

The earth around them grew wilder and wilder, rougher and rougher, and Harry suspected they were getting into areas that no longer lay under Gringotts. Soon, though, he became unsure of what material actually surrounded them—soil, stone, or metal. It gleamed and flashed in the light that the silver chains on the hanarz began radiating, rather like steel. But Harry brushed against it once or twice,

and found it warm, and as hard as rock. He shook his head, and decided that he wouldn't try to solve the mystery. So long as the goblins knew where they were going and would be able to prevent the attack that Voldemort planned to unleash from taking the Muggles, then Harry would rest content.

The hanarz turned around when they finally came to a door. "What you are about to see, no humans has ever seen," she said.

Harry drew in a startled breath, but she hadn't allowed him time to react. She turned away instead, and opened the door with a touch of her fingers. Harry thought he saw a chain link glimmering for a moment in her spread hand, but it was gone when he looked for it again.

The door opened.

The room beyond the door breathed. That was the only way Harry could think of to describe it. It was magic, he knew that, but it didn't feel like anything he'd ever touched, though it was as powerful as several of them—his own wandless magic, the corrupt truce-dance that Voldemort had employed in the graveyard, the Dark power of Walpurgis Night. It flowed out to welcome the goblins, though it hesitated over Harry until the hanarz shook one of the lengths of metal that Harry was now sure ran into her flesh. Then it enwrapped him, too, and it was like nothing so much as being swallowed by some enormous warm beast with no teeth.

Harry tried to grasp it, both with his own magic and with his understanding. They slipped again and again. Harry shivered—with excitement, not fear. This was magic he would never know, never learn, and that was all right. There should still be some mysteries left in the world.

The hanarz moved to stand in the center of the room. She held out her arms and turned her back to Harry and the door. One of the two goblins who had accompanied them at once hurried forward and removed the loose robes that were all she wore in the way of clothing.

That revealed her fully. Oddly, the first impression that Harry had of her, perhaps because of the dark gray of her skin, was of a dungeon. Lengths of chain were riveted to her shoulders and sewn under the skin of her back. One pair of conjoined manacles hung from the back of her right knee. Small, polished rubies winked along her spine like the eyes of rats hiding in corners. The silver chain around her neck was the only one that looked like an ornament. The rest was, Harry sensed, the ordinary armory of a working hanarz. He wondered how long it had been since the goblins had been like this, and how much longer since any human had caught a glimpse of what they could be.

He closed his eyes, humbled almost beyond belief.

He opened them quickly enough when the hanarz began to sing.

It was a song that would have done a raven proud, full of rolling, discordant noise, the clash of chains and thunder. Most of the chains on her body rose up and danced to it. The longest link, the one around her shoulders, lashed down and wrapped about her arms, drawing them behind her back and up over her head. The hanarz showed no sign of pain, even when Harry knew that one of her shoulders must be close to dislocation. She just kept singing, and the metal writhed around her and encased her.

Then she spun.

The chains duplicated themselves, perfect in every respect except that their copies weren't fastened to the hanarz. They followed her for a moment, and then sprouted more copies, and more, and more. Then they snapped outward.

Harry ducked as one of them flew at him. When he looked up, though, he could see it thinning like mist. It hit the wall and sailed right on through, vanishing. Harry stared after it, and wondered what sprouting illusions of chains would do.

"It is to secure the tunnels," the goblin standing behind him murmured, sounding a bit awed. Harry wondered if the emotion came from never having seen this himself. "She has sent the chains to the tunnels that stretch in all directions, from here to the Muggle world, and under us

as well. They will lie in wait. If basilisks or any with the Dark Mark on their arms walk past them, then they will rise.”

He didn't elaborate on what they would do then. He didn't have to. Harry shivered, and was glad that the southern goblins were on his side.

He suspected that Draco and Narcissa would be unhappy about his having left them in the upper bank, but, as he watched the hanarz helped back into her robe, he thought seeing this had been worth it—just like the fragile thing in his pocket, which he touched to assure himself it was still there and unbroken, was worth the risk of their scoldings.

The world is changing. I know the goblins are ready for it, but I wonder if the wizards are.

Lucius found it easy to accompany his wife and son and Harry to Diagon Alley that morning, and to slip away during the time they went to Gringotts. After all, he did not need to withdraw money from the Malfoy vaults himself, and Narcissa accepted that he did not want to spend every minute with Harry the way that she and Draco did. And it was even more natural to walk into Ollivander's, and catch the old man's eye, and wait patiently until he dismissed his latest customer. Lucius concealed a sneer as the witch walked past. Any woman who found her wand so easily was hardly formidable.

Ollivander bustled about, closing his door and hanging dark curtains over the windows. As he did so, the lamps in the shop came to life, flames contained in heavily enchanted glass shells so that they stood no chance of lighting the wands on fire. Lucius curled his lip as he stared up at the boxes of wands and wands. There was no way that Ollivander could have made them all, and that would mean that most of them were worth far less than what he charged for them.

But then, that is the way of those who sell things for a living, Lucius thought, and turned away to find the older wizard regarding him with a certain air of resignation.

“It is ready?” he asked.

“It is, yes, sir.” Ollivander drew out a box from beneath the counter and put it reverently on the surface. He was slipping back into his seller’s persona, as Lucius had thought might happen. “A bit of crafting it cost me, but it will fit your hand perfectly and work for the spells that—”

“That I specified, yes.” Lucius did not wish Ollivander to speak their names aloud. There were, lately, rumors of Aurors using spells that let them draw out the memories of spoken words from the walls of a room. In that way, letters were much safer. Lucius did not intend to be caught.

He opened the box, and eyed the wand lying there.

It was made of ash, and Lucius knew it would have a dragon heartstring core, because he had asked for it. He lifted the wand from the box with his left hand, and felt a single thrum of deep, true magic shoot up his left arm. He smiled and graced Ollivander with a slight nod.

“It will do,” he said. “Since I do not intend to pay you for it, the creation of a blank wand must be reward enough.”

Ollivander bowed his head and was silent. He knew as well as Lucius that blank wands—wands created for only a single purpose, to be dropped and discarded when the task was done—were illegal, banned by the Ministry. They had no essential connection to the wizards who wielded them, not like their own wands, nor to their makers. When they were discarded, no spell could track them back to their owners, because they had never really been owners, only users.

A blank wand was perfect for what Lucius had in mind.

He slid the blank wand into his pocket and headed up the street at an easy walking pace, to find the Magical Menagerie.

The world is changing, and I will be a single small and unnoticed change in the middle of it. But I suspect I am the one that will cut the deepest.

Harry came out of Flourish and Blotts loaded down with books for the next school year. He was carrying half of them in the crook of his right arm, and half floating behind him, despite Draco's hints—due mostly, Harry was sure, to his agitation about being left behind in the bank—that that would cause people to notice him and stare at him more.

So let them stare. It's not like they're not already doing it.

Harry had felt the pressure of eyes from the moment they emerged from Gringotts. More wizards and witches were bustling about now than at the early hour of eight when they arrived, and most of them would have read the Prophet. They would be used to photographs of him, Harry thought glumly. After she'd refused his offer to conduct an interview with him, Skeeter had taken to talking about his exploits from the past year, and putting photographs of him as he was then under the grimmest details available to the public about his child abuse. She didn't do much more than that. She didn't have to. Harry had read those few of the articles he could stand to read. She was doing a much more effective job at smearing his parents and Dumbledore by her silent portrait of his survival than the gossip articles by Melinda Honeywhistle and her ilk, which often contradicted themselves the next day.

It didn't take long for the first motherly witch to come up to him, sniffing, and exclaim over the loss of his poor hand, and want to see his left wrist, because "my sister's a Healer at St. Mungo's, and I just know that I've inherited some of her Healing skill." Harry extended it to her, but pulled it back the instant she started to draw out her wand.

"That's all right," he said politely. "I think I'd like the name of your sister instead. Can I have it?"

He let the name slide through his head. He had no intention of going to that particular Healer, but it made the witch happy to think she was doing some good, and it got rid of the chance that she would cast dangerous magic on his stump.

That was only the beginning. One pureblood Light wizard exclaimed that Harry was too young to have suffered such a degrading wound, and offered to let him know about discount prices on artificial hands.

A few people wanted to “talk” to him about his abuse; those, Harry refused outright, knowing they would turn around and sell their stories to the papers. Others lingered and stared at him with pitying eyes, but hurried away when Draco stared back at them. Draco was getting twitchy, and Harry was wondering if the biggest obstacle to his plan to rescue Vince would actually be Draco’s determination to bundle him off home, rather than just staying in Diagon Alley until eleven that morning.

He spent a moment watching Draco glare at the back of one witch who had actually started to come up and open her mouth, but then had burst into sobs and veered off. There was no denying that Draco had grown taller, of course—Harry had finally, finally started to follow him there, at least—but it was more than that. He held himself more nervously now than he had at the start of summer. His hand was in his pocket and clasp his wand more often.

And he hadn’t mentioned his empathy very often. In fact, he hadn’t at all picked up on Harry’s smug excitement last night or this morning, though he’d noticed the time Harry spent alone in his room, studying maps of Diagon Alley.

Harry narrowed his eyes. The change that’s taken place has something to do with his empathy, I bet.

And then the things he’d been waiting for happened, and he had no more time to think about that.

Someone moved off to the left side of him, coming from between Flourish and Blotts and the stationary shop next to it. Harry spun towards it, his magic flickering up to shove his books out of the way. He was already murmuring Protego charms under his breath, and he knew they would be ready to deflect any hexes from coming at Narcissa and Draco and the other people in the Alley. Those maps had come in handy. He knew the best angle from every shop to hang his Shield Charm wards and cage him and his attackers in a private arena.

He didn’t hang any in front of himself. The whole point was to look unprepared.

A heavyset wizard with what Harry was sure must be a glamour cast on his face—he looked like Dumbledore—dashed from between the buildings, casting spells at him. Harry was already moving, though, his eyes wide open and his breath and his tension hammering in his chest and his lungs. He needed to find Vince, and he needed to make himself a target until the moment when he could safely rescue Vince and get away.

Two more people glamoured to look like Dumbledore were coming around Quality Quidditch Supplies, their wands pointing directly at him. Harry gasped, as if caught by surprise, and stopped. His magic reared up inside of him, but the ability he was unleashing wasn't something they would sense, or know how to stop.

Two hexes came at him at once, one a Body-Bind and one a Diffindo. Harry had to snort. He wondered if Voldemort wanted him captured or killed, or if the two Death Eaters were simply operating on different levels.

The snake of his magic-draining ability snapped out in front of him and swallowed the hexes. Harry was dodging, though, as if he had only escaped by pure luck. He made sure to utter a little scream, to show that he was frightened, at least supposedly. Sure enough, his two attackers pounded after him, joined a moment later by the third.

Harry listened to the screaming and scattering of the other people in the Alley, and waited until his opponents were directly in front of him.

Then he spat out the magic he'd swallowed, as a wave of pure force.

It slammed all three of them backwards, either into the walls of the nearest shops or the Shield Charms, which they bounced off of. Harry snorted and looked around once more. Vince, Vince, where is Vince?

He caught sight of a small, hooded figure standing motionless—with the kind of stillness that could only indicate a Petrificus Totalus—in one of the alleys next to a heavily cloaked wizard. The wizard pulled back the hood that covered the small figure's face, and revealed Vince. Harry nodded.

“How does it feel, Mr. Potter,” the wizard, who must be Mr. Crabbe, asked, “to know that your letter was intercepted and your plan known from the beginning?”

Harry didn’t bother replying. He had anticipated that this might happen, and that meant planning ahead. His hand was already drawing the object he’d brought from his robe pocket. It had survived unbroken.

He caught Mr. Crabbe’s attention with a Hotfoot spell, and sent the glass serpent whisking towards Vince, murmuring, “Portus!” to it as it tumbled.

A Portkey now, as it had always been since Draco had given it to him for his thirteenth birthday, it struck the motionless Vince, and he vanished. He would be safe behind the wards of Malfoy Manor now, Harry knew. That left him here, but that was the point. He was the one who had risked danger to himself and other people and property by luring the Death Eaters to the Alley in the first place.

It was up to him to clean it up.

Harry glanced over his shoulder. The three Death Eaters had climbed back to their feet, and Mr. Crabbe had finally managed to put out the stinging fire on his foot. Narcissa and Draco were still stuck behind the Shield Charms that made a cage of Harry’s part of the Alley, though pounding frantically as they tried to get in.

Harry half-closed his eyes. Really, it was flashy, and he usually disdained to throw his wandless magic around this way. There were better uses for it.

But it would catch the Death Eaters quickly. That was the main point of this exercise.

Harry concentrated, remembering the way he had trapped Dobby in order to get some answers out of him when the house elf came to find him in second year. Blue light surged and flooded out of him, and then fell around the Death Eaters like a rain, solidifying and rising up

into hard walls of azure. The first two Death Eaters glamourised as Dumbledore were caught almost at once, and Harry spent a moment building up the cages firm and tight. If they could prevent a house elf's Apparition, then they could prevent a wizard's.

When he looked sideways, however, it was to find the two other cages empty. Mr. Crabbe and the unknown Death Eater had Apparated away.

Harry breathed out in disappointment, but he was, more truly, satisfied. The only damage looked to be a few impact marks on the nearest walls, and really, any ordinary housekeeping charm could repair those. And, of course, the Death Eaters were wounded, but Harry cared about them far less than he cared about the other people in the Alley, who had either run away or were staring at him.

He lifted the Shield Charms, opening the Alley once more, and then there was an awkward moment where both Draco and Narcissa had come up to him and tried to hug him at once.

"What happened?" demanded Draco. "I saw you throw something, but I couldn't see what it was from behind the wards."

Harry maintained his innocent expression. "I had my Portkey on me," he said. "The serpent that you gave me, Draco. I thought I'd bring it just in case we did run into danger here in the Alley. And when I saw that his father was holding Vince hostage—"

"He was?" Draco sounded disappointed. "I didn't see that, either."

Harry looked inquiringly at Narcissa, who shook her head. Harry relaxed. He'd had a moment's fear that his plan would be uncovered when Mr. Crabbe talked about intercepting his letter, but with all the screaming and the muffling effects of the Shield Charms, it wasn't surprising that neither Draco nor Narcissa had heard.

"Well, he did." Harry put a petulant tone into his voice, as though he were trying to deflect lectures about not using the Portkey to save himself. "I'd written to Vince and asked to see him the other day, but I had no idea that he would be here in the person of a hostage." There.

That tone of feigned innocence is perfect. “I’d just thought I could talk to him, see if he needed help. Unfortunately, his father must be reading his post, and he brought friends with him.” He sighed and dropped his head. “And then his father got away. I captured two of the others, though.” He gestured at the two caged Death Eaters.

“That was stupid of you, Harry,” Draco said, his face pale with anger. “You should have thought that Mr. Crabbe might read Vince’s post.”

Narcissa agreed with him, rather loudly. Harry accepted the scolding in humble silence. He would much rather receive a scolding for being stupid than one for risking his life.

He was aware that he was still breathing hard, and not from exertion. That had been a wilder rescue than he had thought it would be, filled with wild chances. Narcissa and Draco would have guessed his plan if they’d heard Mr. Crabbe’s words. Something could so easily have gone wrong, including the injury of others—at least if he hadn’t been good enough at defensive magic to hang the lines of Shield Charms that caged his pursuers in with him so fast. And if Harry hadn’t been prepared to use his wandless magic good and hard, then all the Death Eaters might have got away.

He found that he could hardly wait to do something like that again.

It’s like flying. You tilt down, and then all you can do is survive as hard as you can.

“Let us go home.”

Harry turned to find Lucius behind him. Most of the people in the Alley seemed to have recovered from their shock by now and were pressing forward, and Lucius obviously didn’t want to be questioned by the public, or by the Aurors when they showed up. For once, Harry thought, they were in perfect agreement.

He concealed a bright smile as he Apparated back to the Manor with Lucius, Narcissa coming behind him with Draco at her side. There’s going to be a lot of fallout from this, no doubt, but not nearly as much as there could have been. And at least Vince is safe.

And as long as they have a plausible tale on the surface—me not thinking—then they're not going to look underneath and see this as a calculated risk with my life.

Lucius shook his head in the moments before he walked up to his family and Harry and declared that the time had come to return to the Manor. He had just been coming out of the Magical Menagerie—the owner had been most obliging, and promised to order what he wanted the moment she could—when his one-time fellows attacked, and so he hadn't had a good view. Somehow, though, from the small smiles he surprised on Harry's face if nothing else, he was sure that Harry had planned this, and had it fall out just as he wanted.

In one stroke he rescues a classmate who probably appealed to him for help, appears a hero once more, and reduces his enemies by two. He plays a very risky game, but a risk achieved is a triumph worth any odds.

For the first time, Lucius thought there was a certain likeness between him and Harry Potter, and that he might like binding the boy to the family for more reasons than just his power and Draco's apparent infatuation with him. Not that he would tell the boy that, of course.

A plausible reason on the surface is worth any amount of lies.

Chapter Fourteen: Bearing Gifts

Conscience is like a scorpion, Harry thought.

It was a thought he was having only because he still lay awake, his hand folded behind his head. He wouldn't be having it if he could just close his eyes and go to sleep. He was being silly. Everything had worked out. Vince had been too much in shock to talk at first when they returned to the Manor, and later Harry had seen him alone and convinced him not to tell the Malfoys anything. Vince had agreed tamely. He kept staring around him with wide eyes, as if he believed that his father would appear from around a corner at any moment and kidnap him back.

Harry had awaited a summons to the Ministry with some dread, thinking he might have to account for his actions, or perhaps testify that his attackers were Death Eaters. The only communication, however, came via a polite owl from Scrimgeour, informing him that the Aurors had transported the cages of blue light back to the Ministry's new prison, Tullianum, and were currently keeping them there. The cages would be even more secure than prison cells for the Death Eaters, right now. They might summon him when they wanted the cages dissipated, but for the moment, everything was well.

Except that it wasn't.

Harry rolled over and closed his eyes more tightly, so that the very faint moonlight coming through the window didn't make any impressions on his eyelids. Argutus slithered briefly across him, reacting to the change in position, and then relaxed. Harry waited to go to sleep.

He didn't.

His conscience went on stinging him, whispering various truths that Harry had thought he would be able to bear better than he was currently bearing them. You know that you lied. You know that you took enormous risks. You know that Draco and Narcissa would see you as acting like a sacrifice again, though Lucius might not care.

But I wasn't acting like a sacrifice, Harry argued back strenuously. I never meant to die, and I wouldn't have given up my life to save Vince. I was sure that I could get him out.

How sure?

Fairly sure! Harry almost wondered if Regulus had come back, since he would argue and scold like this, too, but he also knew that he would have recognized the older wizard's world-weary voice.

But what would have happened if something went wrong?

Nothing did. And if I worry about the consequences to every action, then I'll only drive myself mad with the uncertainty, always wondering if I could have done something better or faster than I wound up doing it.

The voice fell silent, but it didn't need to speak. Harry's conscience could sting him with guilt alone, and that was what it was currently doing.

He had lied to Draco.

He felt guilty about it. He really wished it hadn't been necessary. On the other hand, if he told him about it now, Draco would rage, and if he had told him about it before he tried to rescue Vince, Draco would never have let the rescue happen at all—and then Vince would have gone on suffering Merlin knew what, and likely ended up with a brand on his arm. Harry didn't know what he could do, since it seemed he lost any way he turned, and this was just the smallest set of losses he could choose. Everything he did would offend Draco.

Then don't choose for him. Choose for you.

Harry went still, his eyes actually popping open. There was a new idea.

He'd been thinking in terms of losses. What would happen if he thought about it in terms of gain? If he stopped thinking for just one

moment that every step he took would tip him into a pit, and started thinking about which would ease the sting on his conscience most?

Put like that, the way out was simple. It would make him feel best to tell Draco what had really happened today, and take the rage or the scolding that followed. Harry winced as he remembered what Sirius's pride and unwillingness to reveal what he had truly suffered had cost him. Speech led to suffering—he knew that, too, after what Snape's speaking had done to his parents—but silence led to greater suffering.

And there was a concrete goal, too, something to strive for other than just his own peace of mind. Harry smiled a bit as he stood, gently tucked the complaining Argutus into a corner of his left arm, and then made for the door. He would confront Draco right now, so that Lucius and Narcissa couldn't interfere and Draco would be a bit off-balance.

He wasn't the only one who had a silence to break.

Draco awoke immediately when Harry knocked on his door. He knew it was Harry without having to check, even though his empathy was only letting him feel the strongest of emotions now. He had been having odd dreams in which Harry featured prominently, and before that he had replayed the scene in Diagon Alley over and over in his head, trying to figure out what was missing. He knew something must be missing, but he could not figure out what. It was so typically Harry: not thinking before he did something to help a classmate, using weapons at hand, and using the Portkey that had been meant for his own safety to rescue Vince.

He opened the door for Harry, and was startled to find that he walked in with a decisive stride, his Omen snake coiled on his shoulder. Draco went to retrieve his wand so that he could cast a Lumos, but Harry flicked his hand, and the lamp beside the bed lit with a flash and a flare.

"Show-off," Draco muttered, turning and staring blearily at Harry. "What did you come to talk to me about?" He knew it must be talking; Harry would have been in much more of a hurry if the Manor had been attacked.

“About what happened in Diagon Alley today,” said Harry. “I lied to you.”

And just like that, Draco knew what the lie must be, and what it was about. He narrowed his eyes and took a long step away from Harry. Anger made his hands shake, but he clasped them behind his back and fixed Harry with a glare.

“I came to say that I’m sorry,” said Harry. “I shouldn’t have done it. I thought you wouldn’t let me go to rescue Vince if you knew, and that was the only plan I could think of that would let him get close to me. So I told you that I brought the serpent Portkey along just in case there was trouble, but I knew Vince and probably several Death Eaters would be there. I studied the angles of the alley so that I could hang Shield Charms that would trap me inside with their spells, but something still could have gone wrong. It was stupid, as well as wrong, and I’m sorry.” He paused, waiting for Draco to say something.

“There are times I hate you,” Draco whispered.

Harry winced, but waited.

“You always apologize too late, and you never seem really sorry for it,” said Draco, beginning to gather the wind into his wings. He could remember feeling more enraged with Harry, but not feeling this strong curdling of bitter disappointment at the bottom of the anger. “You know that I love you, yet other things seem to matter to you as much as I do, or more. You promise not to lie to me, and then do it again.” He knew what he said next wasn’t entirely fair, but he was angry. He was allowed to be unfair. “Sometimes you really are your father’s son.”

Harry’s eyes began to glitter, but he held his peace. That only made Draco angrier. Most people would begin shouting at him, and then he could have the satisfaction of knowing that a passion existed which matched his own. Harry only stayed quiet, and while that made it easier to yell at him in some ways, it also made him seem as if he were keeping his temper.

“And you keep doing stupid things, too,” said Draco. “When you realized that you’d been abused, I expected you to stop this, Harry—”

“Why?”

There it is. Harry’s voice carried a knife’s edge. Draco relaxed a bit. Angry as he still was, he knew that he was in control of the conversation now. He was making Harry respond, while his anger and disappointment were manageable.

“Because you aren’t just acting out unconscious training any more, that’s why!” Draco was startled to hear his own voice break in the middle, into a ragged, raw note of fury. Perhaps I’m less in control than I thought. “You know, and yet you keep putting yourself in the middle of dangerous situations. This wasn’t worth it, today.”

“What wasn’t worth it?” Harry moved a step forward, his head lowered and his gaze direct. Harry was still shorter than he was, but Draco nevertheless felt as if they stood eye-to-eye, and a good deal closer than they were now.

“You know what I’m talking about,” he said. “This rescue. Nearly sacrificing your life to save Vince. He wasn’t worth it—”

“That’s the line,” said Harry, and a brief burst of magic exploded from his body, sparking and then vanishing. “Other lives are as important to me as my own, Draco. Not more important. That’s the only difference, now. Would you have said the same thing if I were rescuing your Mum, or you?”

Draco hesitated. He had the impression that he’d just edged onto dangerous territory, but he didn’t know why. He persisted anyway. He knew he was right. Hadn’t Harry admitted he was wrong?

“No,” he said. “That’s because she’s my Mum and I love her, and of course I would want to be rescued. But I wouldn’t want you to die rescuing me, Harry!”

“Well, good,” said Harry, raising his eyebrows in an utterly infuriating way. “I’m not so eager to die anymore, either. But you’re saying that Vince isn’t important enough for me to take the risk, aren’t you?”

“You’re being unreasonable about it,” said Draco, retreating into the cold haughtiness that he had seen win an argument for his father several times. “It’s just that—well, he could be a spy, Harry.”

“Vince?”

Well, no. Draco had to admit, considering the clumsy, shy boy he’d known for most of his life, who had been closer to the older students than any of his yearmates after Gregory Goyle went to Durmstrang, that he found it hard to imagine. Vince was loyal in a typical Slytherin way, and he could keep things hidden behind a stoic mask, but he wasn’t able to interweave himself into someone’s trust the way that a spy would have to be. About the best he could hope to do was observe things unnoticed, and the chance that he’d be able to get the drop on Harry was very small.

Still, his father had no reason to know that about Harry. He might have sent Vince anyway.

“That doesn’t matter,” said Draco. “It could apply in other situations. What if you spared a Death Eater, Harry, and then he turned on you? You’d still be taking a risk when you didn’t have to. You’re still doing that, in fact,” he added, thinking of the cages of blue light that Harry had put around his attackers earlier that day. “You didn’t use any lethal spells against them. You just banged them around a bit and captured the ones you could.”

“I would prefer not to kill,” said Harry quietly, some of the angry light in his eyes dying. “I’ve done it three times, and that’s enough to make me hate it.”

“Three—“

“Rodolphus, Mulciber, Dragonsbane Parkinson.” Harry listed them all as if he spent time thinking about them at night.

Draco would almost have expected pity to overcome his rage, but the rage was way too strong. And a good thing, too, he thought. Harry needs to hear this. "You can't count Rodolphus and Mulciber."

"Can't I." Harry's voice was flat.

"They were both trying to kill you," Draco said. "Well, one was trying to kill you and the other one would have turned on you. It was self-defense, Harry."

Harry shook his head, his face gone calm and quiet. "There are things I'm willing to try and change, Draco," he said. "The lies I tell and the risks I take, for example—"

"You've said that before, too." Draco was unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Harry nodded. "I have. And I suppose I'm asking you now if you think that I can really make the changes—if you trust me."

Draco turned away and paced to the other side of the room. His hands were still shaking when he lifted one to touch his hair in a gesture of nonchalance, and he wished he'd kept it behind his back. He had to swallow several tumbles of words that wouldn't have made sense before he could speak.

"Why is the decision always up to me?" he asked, words catching like a hook in his throat. "I'm the one who takes all the risks, Harry. I'm the one who has to do things like pull you back from the edge and convince you that you're worth something, each and every t-time. I'm the one who told you that I loved you first, and I've gone all this time without much reciprocation. And now you're asking me to trust you without any proof. To make another sacrifice. You're not just performing sacrifices, Harry, you're requiring sacrifices of me."

"Then you need to step away." Harry's response was instant. "You need to breathe your own air, and take your own risks, and stop concerning yourself with what movements I make. Think about what you're going to do for yourself, Draco. What NEWT subjects do you

want to take? What do you want to do other than just sit in Malfoy Manor all day? That wasn't enough for your father. Will it be for you?"

Draco ground his teeth. "You still don't get it," he said. "That's another sacrifice, Harry, requiring me to give up your company."

Harry laughed.

Draco twisted around. "How dare you—"

"Because you're being ridiculous." Harry's words were crisp, and his voice light and cutting as a whip. "You've twisted the idea of sacrifice into an all-encompassing one, Draco. No matter what I do, you can say that you're always right. If I give you trust and love and promises, and keep them, you can say I'm making sacrifices that I don't really want to make. If things stay the same, they're sacrifices of both myself and you. If I move away so that you can grow in your own sunlight, that's another sacrifice of yourself. That's not something I can argue with, and it points to very little trust or faith in me. If you think I'm making a sacrifice of everything, if you believe that's always my motive, then it doesn't matter if I really change, does it? You'll always be distrusting me, waiting for me to change back."

"But you haven't really changed so far!" Draco shouted, feeling himself backed into a corner. It was inconceivable that Harry might win this argument. He was wrong. He'd said so. "And you keep saying that you might, and then never keeping your promise!"

"What kind of action would inspire you to trust me?" Harry asked. "And when would I stop being suspected and tried in your mind?"

"I don't want to tell you! That's the kind of thing that you should be coming up with on your own! You're the one in the wrong here, not me! You were the one who lied and put your life in danger!"

"And you're the one who's kept silent about a change in your empathy," Harry snapped.

Draco could feel his face pale. He honestly hadn't thought about himself as lying in that regard. It was just a lie of omission. He did

plan to tell Harry the truth, as soon as he could find the right time to do it.

“This is an argument about you,” he tried.

“And it would have remained that way, if you hadn’t tried to take the moral high ground.” Harry’s voice went on whipping down. “I can accept that I was wrong, Draco. I can accept your conditions. I cannot accept that you’re blameless. If I owe you honesty and no sacrifices and somehow manage, impossibly, to both give you what you want and not involve you in the process of giving in any way, then you owe me the same fucking things.”

“I can’t,” said Draco. “You’re making me sacrifice.” But his voice had sunk, and his urge to turn his face to the wall was strong.

Harry threw up his arms. “If you’re not going to tell me, then we’re equally balanced, I think,” he said, with a snort. “We’ve both given sacrifices, and you’ve given me a lot more than that, while not involving me in the process of giving, you said. And now I’ve given you honesty, but you won’t hand that back. Fine, Draco. Stew in that. I’m going to bed.” He turned towards the door.

Draco felt a surge of astonishment. “You don’t walk away from arguments,” he said. “And you were wrong. You said so.”

Harry glanced over his shoulder. “Yes, I did. And now what?”

“I could punish you—“

“I am not a child, Draco, and you aren’t my parent,” Harry said, voice dropping into a growl that caused a not entirely unpleasant shiver to run up Draco’s spine. “The usual course among adults is to accept the apology or tell the person apologizing that that isn’t enough, and that they’ll need time or a specific action or whatever. Not punishment. You don’t get to put another monitoring spell on me. I’m sorry that I allowed the first one. It obviously set a dangerous precedent.”

“If I tell you what would make me forgive you, then I’m sacrificing again,” said Draco.

"I told you to get rid of that idea. It does no good. And you should decide what you think I am, too." Harry's face had settled into a scowl. "A child to be punished, and accept the punishment meekly, or someone old enough and strong enough to make harsh changes in himself and stick to them. I think what you want is someone who'll be silent under what you say, but also someone who'll guess your every want before you express it, and fulfill those desires. Probably silently, too."

The injustice of that claim fired Draco's blood again. "I never said that I wanted you to be quiet!"

"Then what do you want from me?" Harry leaned forward. "I am sick of this fucking guessing game. And oh, yes, start and stare at me because I'm using language that you don't want to hear. You've created a world where everything I do is wrong, Draco, everything is something you don't want me to do, and I'm sick of it. It works no better than the little games you played last year, waiting for me to guess your love instead of telling me straight out. I hate head games. I hate manipulation. I hate making honest efforts and being told that no, I don't know what I'm thinking, and it must be coming from some motive I didn't know I had. I've contributed to this mess. Now we can either stand here asking whose fault it is, which frankly strikes me as a boring way to spend an argument, or we can try to settle the mess. I'll show you what I want to give and to do, and you meet me halfway, Draco."

Draco could feel himself breathing faster. He felt as if he stood on the edge of a cliff, and were about to plunge off. He had no idea how Harry could keep going if he felt the same way. And if he didn't feel the same way, wasn't this just another sacrifice that he was demanding of Draco?

"I've done so much for you, Harry," he began.

"I'm not interested in discussing that." Now Harry's voice was a rapid staccato. "I've already chosen my direction, Draco—forward. Frankly, I think the only way we'll ever really love each other is to think about and deal with all of this. Constantly. That means that we speak about

the future as well as the past, and right now, the future is more interesting to me.”

“But I want to talk about the past,” said Draco.

Harry folded his arms and stared at him with a measuring glance. “Then talk.”

Draco scowled. “I shouldn’t have to,” he said. “I know that you’ve done wrong things in the past, and I can’t trust that you won’t keep doing them, Harry. I just can’t.” He knew his voice sounded pathetic on the last word, but he was thinking of Harry dying in the War, or at the end of the War, or confronting Voldemort, and not dealing with it well.

Harry’s face didn’t soften. He just gave a short nod. “Then I can give you my promise and try to live one day at a time without getting into danger, Draco,” he said. “But there are two things that are not going to change. I’m never going to think that someone who hasn’t harmed me ‘isn’t worth it.’ And I’m never going to be comfortable with killing. I’ll do it because I have to. You can’t control my attitude towards it, and I won’t allow you to.”

“But you’ll be miserable otherwise,” said Draco, feeling frustration curl like a worm in his stomach. “You have to get used to it.”

“No, I don’t.”

“But that’s the way it is!” Draco exclaimed. He’d been reading the histories of the Dark Lord’s War—he supposed he should call it the First War, now, since Voldemort had returned again—and the things he’d learned sickened him. One thing was clear, though. Soldiers became numb and hardened, or they didn’t survive. “You’ll be bleeding from the heart with every wound, otherwise.”

“That’s how I’ll know I’m still alive,” Harry said. “And I’m not like other people, Draco. I thought we established this already. Now. We have to decide how to make sure that you can live the way you want to, without drowning in my shadow. I want to know what you like to do.”

Draco just stared at him, feeling hopeless. “I don’t know,” he mumbled at last. “I know a few things I like, like Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, but I haven’t thought about a career, if that’s what you mean. Malfoys don’t have to have careers.” He knew he sounded petulant. He didn’t care. He was trying to figure out what had gone wrong. A day ago, he thought, if Harry had been speaking these words, he would have been ecstatic. But something had changed between then and now. He wanted something else from Harry.

He couldn’t figure out what it was.

“I didn’t necessarily mean a career.” Harry’s tone was inflexible. “I mean what you want to be able to say at your death that you did. And that means besides loving me.”

Draco’s heart slowly started beating again. Knowing that Harry considered them as having a shared future helped immensely.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Most people don’t know right now.”

“But most people haven’t been as obsessed with a single person as you’ve been,” said Harry, his voice but not his words going soft. “They might have some idea. Wanting to travel to France, or become an Auror, or date a boy from Ravenclaw. They’re vague ambitions, they can change, but they have them. What are yours?”

Draco frowned. He was slowly moving past the fact that it was Harry asking him these things, and the part of his brain that demanded answers from himself was displeased. Did he really have no ambitions?

Well, no, that wasn’t true. There were some vague ambitions, as Harry said, though Draco hadn’t considered them worth anything because they didn’t have the rock-solidity of his own parents’ plans and dreams. And until tonight, he had thought more about the changes his soul had gone through than what the consequences of those changes might be. Grandiose visions of defying his father and becoming a hero in the War at Harry’s side—somehow—were as far as he’d got along that path.

Asked to solidify them, could he?

Of course I can. That's a silly thing to ask.

"I like history," he said. "And I'd like to be able to create spells, but I don't know if I have the talent for it."

"A lot of that is desire," said Harry at once. "Some is power, too, of course. Snape created his own spells, and he's powerful. But pressing need could drive you to make a spell." A shadow fell across his face for a moment, and then he shook his head and dispelled it. "There are books in your library on it. Why have you never read them?" He was definitely curious now.

"I don't know," Draco muttered. "I guess I thought I wasn't strong enough in magic, so it didn't matter if I read them or not."

"Read them," Harry advised.

"What, you aren't going to show them to me?" Draco demanded.

"No," said Harry, "for the same reason that I haven't included you in every vates negotiation I've ever had. That's a part of my life that I sometimes want to share, but not always, and some parts of it you can't follow me into. I want you to be able to have something of your own like that. I don't have any special interest in creating spells. I'll listen to what you really want to tell me, but I won't support you step by step. If nothing else, I'm not sure I'll have the time," he added dryly.

"If this were a normal relationship, we wouldn't have discussions like this," Draco muttered. "We'd just grow into it."

Harry covered the distance between them and put his hand under Draco's chin, lifting it. That wasn't fair, Draco thought, not when he was shorter. "This isn't normal, Draco," he said. "It never will be. If you want someone normal, then you should look away from me."

His eyes were calm and honest, and Draco wanted to slap him. "Don't you care at all?" he asked.

A faint smile quirked Harry's mouth. "You're doing it again," he said easily. "You expect someone to get angry about this, so you get upset when I don't. But I do care, Draco." His arms abruptly tightened around Draco in an embrace. "I don't want to lose you. But if it would be best for you to love someone normal, then yes, I would let you go. How could I keep you in prison, when I would hate it myself?"

Draco wondered for one moment if Harry was hugging him only because Draco might want him to, or because Harry really wanted to—

And then he wanted to smack himself in the forehead. That was what Harry was talking about. If Draco distrusted his every action because he thought the notion of sacrifice might lie behind it, then he couldn't really claim to trust Harry at all. He had to listen to his words and try to give Harry the second chances that he would have wanted extended to him.

"I don't want to love someone normal," he answered, gently pulling himself away from the embrace. "That means ordinary, and Malfoys don't do ordinary."

Harry laughed at him, and then waited. Draco enjoyed looking at him, but had the uneasy feeling that Harry expected him to say something.

"The thing about your empathy that you were hiding from me?" Harry prompted gently.

Draco shivered and closed his eyes. Harry would hate this. He just knew it.

On the other hand, he wanted to tell him. And Harry was right that he couldn't expect honesty where he wouldn't give it. And Harry had brought the topic back up, when it would have been easier on both of them to just let it go.

"My gift's mutated so that I can possess people," he admitted quietly. "I possessed a Death Eater during the battle at the Weasels', and made her Stun herself. Then I accidentally woke up in my father's body the other day. My empathy's getting smaller, so I think it turned

into this. But it's really close to compulsion, and I knew that you'd hate me."

There. He'd said it.

He promised himself a full count of ten before he opened his eyes. But he cheated and peeked on four.

Harry was smiling gently at him, with a smile that Draco was almost sure he hadn't meant to let Draco see, trailing one finger just above the spot on his forehead where a scar like the lightning bolt would have been, if he'd had one. His face was tender, and open, and so full of love that Draco's throat started aching.

Harry blinked, and caught himself, and started to close his expression again. But he'd already noticed Draco's open eye by then. He hesitated, and relaxed his face into the smile again.

Draco almost forgot to be nervous.

"I don't blame you at all," Harry said quietly. "It's not like you asked for this, and it's not like you immediately started trying to use it to harm people. You need to practice with it, obviously, and get it under control."

"Who would let me possess his mind?" Draco asked bitterly.

"I would."

Draco started to open his mouth to say that of course Harry would do that, because he liked sacrifices, and paused. Could he really believe that someone with that expression on his face was only doing this because he would have done it for anyone?

"I trust you," Harry confirmed calmly. "And my mind's complex, reordered and rebuilt—good training for dealing with a simpler one. I know that I can fight back if I ever really feel threatened. It's the best solution. If you agree, of course."

Draco swallowed. He didn't really want to speak, because he was sure that any words would not have conveyed what he was feeling—the mixture of wary trust and gratitude and love.

He leaned forward and kissed Harry gently instead. Harry permitted it, even tilting his head to welcome him in. Draco felt himself becoming more composed as they kissed, and by the time he broke away, he knew that his cheeks weren't as flushed and his breathing was less rapid.

On the other hand, he was pleased to see, both of those things had happened to Harry.

Harry coughed and glanced away from him. "Is there anything else you can think of that we need to talk about?" he asked.

The way that you retreat from touching me? But Draco was more than content to wait for their next argument for that. This time, he would be the one who had the advantage over Harry, he thought. There was one part of their bond that was as much a competition as anything else. "Not until morning," he said.

Harry nodded to him, then said, "I'm still sorry, and I still think you should be," and marched to the door.

Draco sat down slowly on his bed, and, for the first time, allowed himself to think about the fact that they'd fought with words alone, not fists or magic, and that Harry had taken the initiative to come and tell him the truth, even though he hadn't had to; he could have distracted Draco thoroughly enough that he would let the nagging doubts go, especially in his own doubt about his possession gift.

But it hadn't happened that way.

It might not be normal, but I think it's better than that.

Interlude: A Need You Did Not Know You Had

August 11th, 1995

Dear Headmistress McGonagall:

I know that you have found no suitable candidate for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I am writing to offer you my services. I have long experience in both Dark magic and the ways of protecting against it, and I intend to teach the children practical spells and countercurses that none of their previous professors have managed. It is, of course, your choice whether to employ me, but I think you would prefer my presence to that of some of the strangers who must otherwise inevitably appear. You have met me before, and I know the school inside and out, and am committed to its protection. You may not think that you can trust me, but you can.

Acies Lestrangle.

August 12th, 1995

I am not interested in employing anyone with that last name, much less a Dark witch. Quite apart from the question of whether to trust you or not, no parent would let their child be taught by someone with your rather unfortunate relatives. Please be so kind as not to insult my intelligence by asking again.

Minerva McGonagall,

Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

August 12th, 1995

Dear Remus:

I hope that you will not think me unkind for appealing to you only now. I had heard nothing of you, and had hoped that you were happy, wherever you were.

Now I must ask that you come out of retirement. I have become Headmistress of Hogwarts, as you must have heard by now, and while I can juggle my duties as Transfiguration Professor with the help of some NEWT students until a suitable candidate can be found, I cannot continue to also be Head of Gryffindor House. I would like to ask you to return and take up this position.

I know that Ministry laws prevent werewolves from holding any paying employment. I have thought of a solution to get around this. I would offer you room and board at Hogwarts, as well as the Wolfsbane Potion that Severus brews, in exchange for your protection and counseling of the Gryffindor students.

Will this be acceptable? You are one of the gentlest men I know, and have a keen sense of right and wrong—sharpened, I think, by your experiences in recent years. I am sorry that I must ask you to return now, when two of your best friends and the previous Headmaster are awaiting trial, and Harry and Connor will be starting their fifth year. But I can think of no one else I would trust at this point in time.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall.

August 14th, 1995

Dear Headmistress McGonagall:

I think you mistake me. I am going to teach at Hogwarts School this year. The position of Defense Against the Dark Arts would be the easiest for me to take, and I know that you have found no candidate for it. Would you truly try to take those classes on your own overloaded shoulders, or give them to someone whom you do not know and cannot trust? Now, with the War beginning and this subject

the most crucial in the school? I cannot believe that you would have so little care for your students.

You need not worry about my last name. For years, I have maintained another identity, under my mother's family name: Acies Merryweather. Very few people know of me, or the truth of me. I will not alarm any parents by taking up the post, and I assure you that my teaching skills are up to par.

Acies Lestrangle.

August 14th, 1995

Dear Minerva:

I have been in the Seers' Sanctuary, and I am glad that they have lifted the shadows around their home for right now, so that owls may fly in and out swiftly. Otherwise, it is likely that your post wouldn't have reached me until after the school year had already begun, and my answer might take almost as long to return.

I am delighted to take up your offer. I want to be in the world again. I think it's time. The main concern I have is the level of general knowledge as to my lycanthropy. There might be parents who object even to a werewolf not actually teaching their students, as long as I'm in the school, and even if they cannot bring legal objections against us. Are you prepared to deal with this?

Sincerely,

Remus Lupin.

August 15th, 1995

You cannot be serious. You are still a Dark witch, and my other objections still stand. You have come cloaked to me every time I have seen you. How could you teach a class like that?

Minerva McGonagall.

August 15th, 1995

Dear Remus:

I am prepared to fight. Dumbledore's reputation is in all the papers, and the stories about him grow wilder and wilder. I must be seen to be a leader, not merely cringing in the shadow of what he has done, and that includes making my own decisions, as defiant as they might have to be. I have written a polite letter to the Minister, both to inform him of my intentions and to tell him not to interfere. The other storms, I will brave as they come. In certain ways, your return could not have been better timed. The Daily Prophet and the lesser incarnations of the gossip rags are still talking about Harry's parents, about Dumbledore, about the upcoming trial, about the return of You-Know-Who, and about the effects of all of this on the Boy-Who-Lived and the Young Hero, as they have come to call Harry.

Sincerely,

Minerva.

August 16th, 1995

Dear Headmistress McGonagall:

I can control myself for the length of time I have to teach classes. I will hold no student's gaze for more than a few minutes. That should make it all right. My eyes are the most dangerous part of me.

The Dark families who are likeliest to know me are all allies of Harry Potter. In fact, I myself am one of Mr. Potter's allies, though I must admit that I have not been in close contact with him lately. I have been speaking to the Deep Singers, whom you know as dragons.

They will be there to help when the storms come. So they have promised me.

Come, Headmistress. You have still not found a candidate, for all your frantic interviews. I have seen that. I have told you one of the prophecies that Dumbledore knew and took care to keep concealed, and I am outside the wards, so that I can see the weaknesses in them. You have need of me. I am ready to fulfill that need.

Acies Lestrangle.

August 16th, 1995

Dear Minerva:

That is all I needed to hear. Then I will come to Hogwarts. I ask only that you warn Harry and Connor about it in advance, so that they aren't shocked at seeing me. I should be there four days from now.

Sincerely,

Remus Lupin.

August 18th, 1995

Dear Remus:

Thank you. I will tell Harry and Connor about your return. I'll call Harry, at least, in to meet you a few days before the term starts. I think a face-to-face meeting would be more beneficial for him, and there is someone else I need him to forge a workable relationship with.

Sincerely,

Minerva.

August 20th, 1995

It seems I am not going to get rid of you, and I do need a Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. None of the other candidates have been remotely suitable. I warn you, Lestrage. One foot or talon out of line, and I will destroy you, with all the power that is in both me and Hogwarts. I see no reason to hide behind pretty words or trust that I do not have.

Minerva McGonagall,

Headmistress.

August 21st, 1995

Dear Headmistress:

I assure you, that is perfectly acceptable to me. You may confirm with Harry Potter that I am in fact his ally. I will see you in two days. There is a bit of establishing to be done with the Merryweather accounts first.

Acies Merryweather.

Chapter Fifteen: Sitting on Voldemort

“Ready?”

Draco breathed out slowly and wiped his hands on his shirt. Harry blinked. He had realized that Draco was nervous, but for some reason, he hadn't thought he was that nervous. “Yeah,” he said at last, voice lower than usual. “I am. What about you?”

“I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't,” said Harry. He kept his voice low, soothing. He could already see that most of the calmness and composure in this exercise would have to depend on him. Draco was going to do it, but he would be struggling against the weight of his own panic. Harry wouldn't give him any extra fear to worry him.

He leaned backward and fixed his eyes calmly on Draco's, keeping them open to their widest extent and putting all the trust he could in them. Draco shivered, once, and then took a deep breath and returned the gaze.

Harry felt an odd push on his mind. It wasn't like compulsion, which had always resembled a wind to him when he noticed it at all. He lowered some of his shields and let it through, and then Draco was inside his mind.

It was a clenched fist-like presence, uncomfortable. Harry kept looking at Draco's face, focusing on the details of the line of his nose and the wisps of pale hair around his head, to keep himself from panicking. Draco, of course, startled and tried to withdraw.

“No,” said Harry aloud, and let the negative ring in his thoughts, too. Draco hesitated. “I made the decision to open my mind to you,” said Harry, and thought of the swirling patterns in Argutus's scales, of unicorns dancing, of Fawkes singing some of his calmer songs. “I want you to stay until you manage to possess me, Draco.”

Draco didn't nod, because his body appeared to go utterly rigid when he was in possession of someone else's mind. They would have to do something about that if they were ever to use this power in battle,

Harry thought. Draco couldn't just abandon his body in the middle of the field, or someone would hex or kill him as he lay helpless.

Carefully, Draco reached out. Harry didn't know exactly what he was doing until his own hand rose into his field of vision. He certainly hadn't commanded it to do that. He breathed tightly, and knew that reaction, at least, was entirely his.

Draco moved his hand towards his face. Harry thought he was trying to make him scratch his nose.

Let him. It's all right. You trust him, don't you? And you know that he wouldn't hurt you. This is nothing like being bound in a web. This is more like being tangled in a net and trusting Draco to get you down.

Save that, this time, Draco was the one who had put him in the net, too. The fist-like pressure on his brain grew worse, as if Draco were gripping and squeezing some of his thoughts. Harry narrowed his focus to his breathing.

His hand scratched his nose on the second try; before that, it had almost poked him in the eye. Draco lowered it back to his side, and made Harry's throat swallow. Harry beat down the reflex of his Occlumency shields to grab Draco and throw him out of his head.

Tentatively, Harry's body took one step forward.

His right foot came down wrong, Draco obviously used to using a slightly longer leg, and he sprawled on the carpet. Harry lost control of his reflexes, and abruptly he was alone in his head save for the slight warm presence of Fawkes's bond, panting, while Draco's body shook, nearly sprawled itself, and then straightened with a gasp that indicated Draco was back in possession of his own mind.

He turned his head away, looking miserable. Harry took a moment to recover, then went over to him and hugged him tightly. Draco squeaked a bit as the air went out of his lungs, then relaxed and hugged Harry back.

"You don't—blame me for that?" he whispered.

“Of course not,” said Harry. “It’ll just take a little more time than we thought to work up to walking, that’s all.” He smiled as Draco huffed indignantly. “Next time, I should be sitting in a chair, and we’ll have you try other, smaller steps before you use so many of my muscles at once.”

“I could feel you fighting,” said Draco. “You didn’t like it. You don’t like being held and restrained.”

“Well, no,” Harry admitted, memories of being strapped down on the stone in the graveyard flashing through his head. “But that doesn’t mean that I can’t tolerate you in my head, Draco. It’ll get easier with time. I’ll relax and trust you even more than I do.”

Draco looked at him thoughtfully. Then, without speaking, he reached out and ran his hand down Harry’s cheek. Harry blinked at him in confusion. There didn’t seem to be any particular reason to do that. Granted, he couldn’t feel Draco’s emotions or even his presence in his head now, but he thought he could guess reasons for a shared touch pretty well.

Draco stepped behind him. Harry tensed, but waited. This was a silent test of trust, too, he thought. He didn’t believe Draco would ever stab him in the back, either figuratively or literally.

Fingers ran up Harry’s spine, then down and along his sides. Harry squirmed, but waited again. There surely had to be more to it than this. When Draco reached the point, then he would know what it was.

Draco leaned in and gently breathed on the back of his neck, then tightened his arms around Harry’s waist and moved his hair so that it brushed Harry’s. Harry shivered. The pressure was on the brink of turning into something else, something that he found harder to tolerate—

Something he couldn’t tolerate. He abruptly broke away from Draco and whirled around. Draco didn’t appear alarmed. He was only watching Harry, and nodding as if he had expected this.

“What?” Harry demanded.

“Something I’d suspected for a while, but not known for certain until I was in your head,” said Draco calmly. “It wasn’t really me making you uncomfortable, Harry, or even the fact of someone controlling your body. You were all right with that until I made you fall and your reflexes kicked in. It was the way you felt it. A touch.”

“Yes. So?” Harry folded his arms, feeling his panic subside as quickly as it had come. He didn’t really understand the reaction, either, but he didn’t think it important to talk about.

“You’re not comfortable with my touching you,” said Draco. “You put up with it. But when it turns pleasurable...” He shrugged, as if Harry should know exactly what he was talking about from those few clues.

Harry waited. Draco waited, and stared at him.

“I don’t understand.” Harry was aware that he was whining like a child, but he couldn’t help it. Draco wasn’t explaining this at all well. He turned away and stalked over to the far side of Draco’s bedroom, scowling at the door.

“You’re afraid of things that feel good,” said Draco, as if he were discussing the weather. “I suppose that’s only natural, Harry, after all the training your mother put you through. But it’s something damaging, something I don’t think can be allowed to stay the way it is.”

Harry stiffened and glanced over his shoulder. Draco only looked more serene than ever. How dare he? “It has to be something else. I would have rooted out that training when I rebuilt my mind.”

“You destroyed what you were aware of, Harry,” said Draco. “And even then, you still have to reinforce what you did with promises and conscious attempts to do better. I know. I read a little about Occlumency and Legilimency last year, when I researched my empathy, remember? You wanted me to learn how to shield. And I read that Legilimency works best with conscious thoughts and memories. You did a great thing, but I don’t think it’s complete yet.”

Harry was quiet. He could remember some aspects of his training that he supposed might have caused this, but he wasn't used to thinking of them that way. The year before Hogwarts, he'd learned to do without things like warmth after it rained, and he knew that he'd dulled the taste of chocolate in his own mouth until he couldn't understand the fuss others made over Chocolate Frogs. That was just to keep him from being distracted from his task of protecting Connor, though.

He had never thought that it might hinder him from feeling physical pleasure. Of course, he'd never planned on having a lover or spouse, either. There simply wouldn't be enough time, not with Connor as the focus and center of his life.

And now—

Now, his immediate impulse was to say that there wasn't time, either. He was a guardian, and a protector, and a teacher, and a vates, and a brother, and to some extent the Boy-Who-Lived, and Voldemort's enemy.

But he knew that wasn't true, and if it had been, he would never have kissed Draco, would have told him that he loved him but wasn't in love with him. That would have been lying on a level that Harry, at his least self-aware, didn't think he could have maintained, because it would cause too much hurt to Draco.

He slowly turned around again. Draco nodded before he could say anything.

"Yes," he said quietly. "This is part of the pushing I was talking about, Harry. I love competing with you and talking with you and trying to work out possession with you, Merlin knows, but I'd also like to go to bed with you at some point." He flushed, but didn't look away. Harry had the impression that he must have practiced these words, to give himself the courage to say them. "I'll let you think about it. But I'm not going to let you stop thinking about it, and I'm not going to give up just because you're uncomfortable feeling that good for right now."

Harry stamped on the panic that wanted to well up. He could do this. He would do this. What kinds of struggles had he been nerving himself to face when he rebuilt his mind, if not these?

And, on the other side of obligation to Draco and accepting this as a necessity of the bond they would have to have, there was the hope that he really could feel good someday, really do it for his own pleasure. Harry flushed as he thought about it. At least, though, he was thinking about it.

That that wasn't going to be enough...

Well, it just wasn't.

He met Draco's eyes and nodded.

Draco smiled at him. "I think I'm going to enjoy those lessons even more than the ones on possession," he said.

Harry flushed anew, but did his best to smile back.
"Tell me what you've been doing this week, Harry."

That was always the way Elfrida began one of their weekly meetings. This time, though, she'd added a new action, bringing Marian along and placing her gently in Harry's arms before he could object. Harry dandled her on his knee, blinking into her eyes. Marian already seemed changed from just a few weeks ago. She was more active now, her eyes going in several directions at once, but focusing longer on different things, too. She reached determinedly for his glasses, and Harry had to shift her about a bit to prevent her from reaching them; his hand was fully occupied in holding her head up. Marian stuck her lip out at him with a soft popping noise, as much to say that he was no fun.

Harry looked across the sitting room at Elfrida, who had taken one of the other chairs and was watching him in silent patience. She would be quite happy to go on watching him until Merlin woke, Harry thought.

“Studying, mostly,” said Harry. “And helping Draco study.” He hesitated for a moment, since he wasn’t going to tell Elfrida about the possession gift without Draco’s permission, but he could tell her about other things. “He wants to have some interests independent of me. So I find some books for him, and then he reads them. Sometimes he talks to me about them.” Harry cocked his head to the side, wondering if this was something he could ask Elfrida about. “How did you make sure that you didn’t drown in Adalrico and your children, Mrs. Bulstrode?”

Elfrida smiled. “I built myself around an impulse, Harry. The impulse to protect and to have my way in the house.” She blushed and lowered her eyes. “Of course I didn’t ever try to have my way in public. That wouldn’t be right, for a puellaris witch. But no one else in my family has such a strong desire to protect. Adalrico’s genius is for battle, and my girls are, of course, children, and still need protection themselves.” She gave an indulgent glance to Marian.

“And that never discontented you?” Harry asked, unable to imagine it.

“No. But I chose to become a puellaris witch. Are you encountering difficulties in trying to make Draco more independent?”

“Yes.” Harry shifted position, and then had to scramble to catch Marian when her legs went in a different direction. She only laughed, as if this were great good fun. “I don’t know how to make sure that I’m not doing things that will influence him unduly. And he wants to achieve ambitions of his own, but as long as he spends all this time with me, can he, ever?”

“I am not lost, though I know many people who would say so,” said Elfrida serenely. “What you must do, Harry, is attend to his choices, first and foremost. In the end, if he is not interested in certain things, then he will not choose to be interested in them. And if he chooses to focus most of his being on you, then that is the way it should be.”

Harry frowned. “It sounds like someone choosing to be a slave.”

“Do you think I am?”

Harry shook his head. "No. But you didn't meet your husband for years, did you, Mrs. Bulstrode? And then you could split your focus between him and your children, when you needed to." He looked down at Marian in his arms again. He wondered how anyone could avoid giving their full attention to a child this young.

Lily did when she raised you. She paid more attention to Dumbledore and the ideals she was sacrificing for.

Harry carefully skirted around the thoughts. They would only lead him to useless blaming of his mother. Sobbing and raging about the past was next to useless. Calm discussion would do the most good.

"All of that is true," said Elfrida, startling him and pulling his attention back to the present. "But if you truly fear that Draco is too bound to you, drowning in you, as you put it, then only give him the time and space to make his choices. That is all you can do, Harry. Sooner or later, you must stop distrusting someone else's motives. If Draco chooses to think a good deal of you even after time and space and prompting to do otherwise, then you must trust that that is what he wishes to do."

It sounded so similar to what he'd said about Draco needing to trust him and stop thinking he always acted out of motives of sacrifice that Harry flushed. He looked down at Marian, and nodded, and joggled her on his knee.

"Tell me what else you did." Elfrida's voice was gentle.

Harry obliged, but wondered, as he always did, what she was getting out of this. He didn't intend to ask. She had chosen to enter these sessions with him, and he had the feeling that her answer would only make him uncomfortable, in any case.

"How would you handle a battlefield like this?"

Harry leaned forward, intently studying the map Adalrico had put before him. It showed a wide, flat plain, with hills on the eastern edge of it, sloping down to meet the plain. On the west, the grass ended abruptly in a long fall to the seashore. Harry studied it carefully for several minutes, until he could be sure that there were no dots

representing trees on the plain, and that the cliffs were too steep to let anyone else attack from that route, unless they were flying.

“As a known battlefield that someone else was trying to invest at the same time, or as ground I could choose?” he asked, glancing up from the map.

Adalrico stood slightly to the right of him, hands folded behind his back and eyes looking at Harry the way Harry had looked at the map. “As ground that you could choose,” he said.

Harry nodded, and let himself get absorbed in the map again. Adalrico had volunteered no more information about why he had chosen to take this teaching up than Elfrida had about their weekly sessions, and Harry supposed he could be contented with the motives he knew. Certainly, teaching him battle strategy could only be a good thing, at least from Adalrico’s point of view.

“I’d have a group of wizards and witches on brooms, ready to come over the cliff, where the enemy wouldn’t be looking,” he said. “Hopefully at noon, when they could dive out of the sun. The enemy would almost have to come out of the east, since the north and the south are too bereft of cover. I’d have prepared the plain with traps—spells designed to go off when someone steps on them, ordinary pit traps and tripwires that can’t be detected with magic, and some harmless attention-getting things like firecrackers, so they’d be off-balance and looking in other directions when we showed up. I’d probably have the army already lying in those areas clear of the traps, with Disillusionment Charms over them. Then they’d stand up and begin the battle the moment the traps started disordering the other side.”

“Why not just Apparate in?” Adalrico argued.

“I’d have spells around the plain already, to take care of Apparition,” said Harry. “Portkeys, too. It’d be difficult to do that if I didn’t know where the battle was going to be, but it’s one of the first steps I’d take the moment we chose the ground, so that our enemies couldn’t just show up beforehand and start harassing us. Force them to come to

us at a certain time, too, since we also chose the ground. They'd have to gather their allies first."

"What if members of your own side started taking heavy casualties? Would you keep the anti-Apparition wards and the other defenses up?"

"For as long as I could," said Harry, and then an idea that hadn't shown up before occurred to him. "At least some of the wizards and witches waiting on brooms should be ready to take the wounded out of there. I'd want professional Quidditch players if I could possibly get them, since they'd be able to dodge spells better."

Adalrico was smiling slightly, but he still looked inclined to argue. "How heavy would the casualties have to be before you dropped the wards and gave the signal to retreat?"

Harry closed his eyes. "Half," he said. "Most of the time, at least. But it would also depend on how many losses the enemy was taking. If they were taking heavier, then I'd encourage my people to stay and fight them. If not, then we're not just losing people, but also morale." He hesitated.

"Say what you're going to say."

"And it would depend on if Voldemort was with them," Harry finished quietly. "He could break most of the spells on the battlefield, and kill people with a single strike." He braced himself and looked up at Adalrico. "Is it true that you helped him design the Black Plague spell, sir?"

Adalrico's face tightened for a long moment. Then he let out his breath. "Yes," he said. "That, and other things, to my everlasting shame." He paused, eyeing Harry. "You are asking if he would have a spell like that with him, to try and wipe out all our people?"

"Yes."

"It's possible," said Adalrico quietly. "My guess is that he won't use the Black Plague spell again. The Healers in St. Mungo's have come

up with defenses against it, and last time it took us almost a year to grow the—spores it came from. All of those were destroyed or carried off by Death Eaters when our Lord fell.” He hesitated, then said, “I retrieved some of them, Harry. Would you—“

“No.”

“But you could—“

“No.”

Adalrico observed him narrowly for a moment, then shook his head. “You will have to use some spells you don’t want to, you know.”

“I know,” said Harry. “But not the spells that gave people nightmares during the First War. The Black Plague spell destroyed countless lives, countless families, countless Aurors. Most of the people I want to ally with me wouldn’t trust me if I used it.”

“Most of the Light families won’t trust you if you use Dark magic, either.” Adalrico folded his arms and studied him disapprovingly. “I think you have turned your back too strongly on sacrifice, Harry. You’ve decided to use Dark magic. I don’t see why this is so different.”

“It’s the specific spell,” said Harry calmly. “You said that it would take almost a year to grow the spores—“

“Not in the condition I’ve preserved them,” said Adalrico. “We could have a Plague inside a month.”

“It’s a spell that’s good only for killing,” said Harry. “Not for healing, not for growing, not for defending lives. I won’t use it for the same reason that I won’t use Cruciatus. They’re cruel and evil without any means of redemption. And what would you say about the person who used them?”

Adalrico’s eyes were shuttered. “I would say that there are many people like that in your ranks already, Potter.” Not a good sign that he’s retreated to my surname, Harry thought. “And I wonder how you

will deal with having them as allies, if you truly think that some spells are evil and not just Dark.”

“Because they are people,” said Harry. “Not spells. And people can change their minds. Tell me, Adalrico. Is it a surprise to you that I won’t manufacture a Plague? That I would try to kill the Death Eaters only if I had to, bind them and bring them to a fair trial if I could, rather than just damning them with Voldemort?”

“Yes,” said Adalrico. “It is. I have seen more of your practical and pureblood side than your moral side, Potter. I thought you understood war better than this. You should use every advantage you have.”

“Only the ones that actually are advantages, not disadvantages that would prejudice some of my allies against me,” said Harry. “I won’t pay as high a price as I would have to for that single spell. I want to end the War, of course, but I don’t think you really understand me. Speed isn’t the most important factor. I don’t want to engender bitterness that would grow against me like the bitterness that’s grown against Voldemort and Dumbledore. They both did what’s efficient instead of what’s right. I won’t.”

Adalrico shook his head and turned away. “Some of your allies will not accept this,” he said in a warning voice.

Harry waited until he turned around again. Then he said, in a measured voice, holding Adalrico’s eyes all the while, “I am more than what my allies think of me, or even what the magical creatures think of me. I have my own goals, and my own things that I won’t do. For example, some of my allies are going to be Muggleborn.”

Perhaps it was just because Harry was watching for it, but he saw the expression of disgust flash across Adalrico’s face.

Harry nodded. “Think about the reasons you hate them. Really, truly think about them. You’ve come up with clever arguments why someone shouldn’t be prejudiced against you just because you were a Death Eater, or because you’re a pureblood, or a Dark wizard. Now turn that around and apply it to the Muggleborns.” Deciding he’d said

all he could for right now, he turned and walked to the door of the small room Lucius had set aside for these weekly lessons.

“Some of us will need better answers than that,” said Adalrico to his back.

Harry turned around. “And some of you will have to learn to live with what you get,” he said gently, and then left the room.

“I have an aunt in France. I could go to her.”

Harry leaned back and looked hard at Vince for a moment. Vince didn’t meet his eyes. He was staring around the library instead, his expression set in misery, but his gaze seemingly unable to rest in one place.

“All right,” said Harry quietly. He ignored Draco’s shifting behind him. Harry and Vince were both sitting. Draco had insisted on standing. Harry wished he wouldn’t, since he thought that was increasing Vince’s nervousness, but he understood. Draco still didn’t think that Vince was an innocent victim, and judging from the binding charms that Lucius and Narcissa had put on him when they arrived back at the Manor—charms that wouldn’t allow him to do magic or wear any glamours as long as he was inside its walls—neither did they.

“It’s no trouble,” Vince whispered. “She can help me. She would have helped me, if she knew I was in trouble. But the letters I sent to her never made it. Only the one I sent to you did.” He stared hopelessly, appealingly, at Harry, and then looked away again. “And I thought my father didn’t find that one. Now I knew that he was trying to trap you, hoping you would arrange to meet me somewhere.”

Harry inclined his head. “I knew that.”

Vince stared at him, and Draco pressed down on his shoulder. “You did?” Vince asked in bewilderment.

“Of course,” said Harry. “Even if your letter got out without being noticed, I didn’t think mine would get in without your father seeing it. But I couldn’t think of any other way to get you to meet me. I didn’t

know where you lived, and I don't think your father would have let you send a Floo name."

Vince shook his head, then rubbed his face with one hand. Harry didn't think he'd been sleeping well. Apart from the battle and the fact that he could have died, there was the distrust from the Malfoys and the idea that his father had been quite willing to sacrifice him, Harry thought. That had to hurt.

"No," Vince whispered. "He wouldn't."

"Are you going to be all right?" Harry asked.

"Yes," said Vince, with emphasis. "I'll go to Beauxbatons. It'll be lots better than Durmstrang." He looked at Harry again. "Thank you for saving my life."

It occurred to Harry, then, something he should have asked much earlier. "What about your mother, Vince? Does she need to be rescued, too?" Draco seemed as if he were now intent on grinding the bones in his shoulder together. Harry ignored him as best he could. This time, the rescue would be a lot less risky. Vince could give them details of the house and the best way to go in.

"No," Vince whispered. "She went away when You-Know-Who called my father back. I went into her bedroom when I came home from school, and it was just—abandoned. I don't know where she went. Maybe to my aunt. She's her sister."

Harry nodded, concealing his contempt for a woman who would run and abandon her own son like that. He hardly had space to talk about motherly behavior. "All right, then. When do you want to go to your aunt's house?"

"I'll owl her today."

Harry waited patiently for more, but Vince had lapsed into silence again, staring at things only he could see. Harry had to lean forward, feeling inexplicably like Madam Shiverwood as he did so, and ask

quietly, "Vince? What happened? Can you speak about the things your father did to you?"

"It wasn't anything too bad," said Vince quickly, and rubbed at his eyes as if he were tired—or about to cry. "Just Imperio a few times, really, and talking about how I was going to become a Death Eater and have to kill D-Draco. He was trying to convert me before he tortured me." He shut his eyes. "I was just too afraid, and I didn't know how I would get away when I went to Durmstrang. The D-Death Eaters are strong there."

Harry nodded, remembering Karkaroff's claim that a nest of fledgling Death Eaters were in the school. "I can understand that." He hesitated again, then said, "And there's nothing I can do for you before you to go to your aunt's?"

"No," Vince whispered. "I know it doesn't sound like much." He said those words in a loud, abrupt voice, and stared at Draco as he said them. "Compared to what you've survived, I mean. But I was so terrified. I woke up and I went to bed in fear. My mother was gone, and my father was changed, and of course the house elves were no help. I had no one to depend on. I knew writing to you was risky, Harry, but it was the only thing I could think of."

"I understand," said Harry. And he did. People had different breaking points. Other people would have gone mad after the graveyard, and other people wouldn't have got quite so jumpy when Draco touched them. "I hope you'll be happy at your aunt's, Vince. I'll let you use Hedwig to write her."

Vince nodded to him, and then stood and walked unsteadily out of the library. Harry watched him until the door closed behind him, bringing the lecture that he expected from Draco.

"You can't trust him, Harry. He could still be lying, or maybe his father put him under Imperius and sent him here to do something."

"Your father's had the house elves watching him," said Harry. "Are you saying that they wouldn't have noticed evidence of things like that? Or that Vince is a good enough wizard to break your mother's

and father's spells?" He leaned back and looked up at Draco, who pressed his lips together.

"No. Of course not. But—it just isn't right, that's all. Why did his father bring him along to Diagon Alley at all?"

"Because he wanted to torture him, I think," said Harry quietly. "And me, with the knowledge of my not being able to save him. Besides, remember that one of the Death Eaters acted like he wanted to capture me, and another like he wanted to hurt me. I think there are divisions in the Death Eaters, Draco."

As he had hoped, that got Draco off the subject of suspicions about Vince, suspicions that Harry saw no use in entertaining until metallic proof of them showed up. "Really?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Some of them would be happy with Voldemort, but others wouldn't. And then he dueled me, and got crippled. I think some of them will be less than impressed with that. Then there's Rosier turning. That might have put the thought into some others' minds. And their positions have changed, now. Some of them have different lives, where their Death Eater affiliation can't be suspected without its destroying them, and some of them won't be happy that Karkaroff has such a good position with Voldemort now. These Death Eaters aren't the same ones the Aurors faced in the First War."

Draco settled down to listen happily to Harry's tales of what he thought might happen, which Harry could speak in his sleep; they were largely what he'd thought of while lying awake at night. Meanwhile, his thoughts dwelled on Vince, and the thought of waking up and going to bed in fear, while a father he'd always loved did incomprehensible things to him, in the name of an even more incomprehensible loyalty.

I can only hope that he finds life in France happier.
Harry woke.

He opened his eyes slowly. He already knew that what woke him was nothing so ordinary as a knock at the door or a vision from Voldemort,

or even Argutus slithering across him in an attempt to get warm. The room was full of the feeling of powerful magic, surging and breathing out like mist, like light.

Harry lay still, waiting. Whatever the magic was, he thought it would reveal itself sooner or later.

It did, coalescing near the foot of his bed, light after mote of light winging in and then becoming part of the body of something golden. Harry stared, wondering for a moment how the creature could have a cruel, curved beak and yet four legs. Then it turned its head and stared at him, and he realized it was a gryphon.

The gryphon came slowly forward on its lion-like legs, and stood staring down at him with fierce, eagle eyes, wings half-spread. Harry met its gaze. He didn't think it was a real gryphon—they were considerably bigger—but he longed to know what it was, and why it would have chosen to take the form of a gryphon.

The gryphon opened its beak, and breath deep and sweet as a roll in a meadow of summer flowers bathed Harry's face.

The breath did not carry words with it, nor visions like the ones that Fawkes's songs inspired, but Harry understood it nonetheless. This gryphon was a part of the Light magic that Voldemort had done a deep injury with his enslaving of the Midsummer sunset. It had finally risen in enough majesty and anger to pay him back, and it insisted that Harry come with it and see what that entailed.

Harry swallowed slightly. He understood that this was a command, not a request, and thoughts of delaying or asking for Draco to come along with them dissolved from his tongue. The Light magic was taking only him, though the gryphon eyed Argutus tolerantly when he climbed to Harry's left shoulder and coiled fiercely around his neck.

The raptor's beak descended, large enough to split open his skull in a single driving blow, and gently clamped around his waist. Harry was lifted irresistibly into the air, and then deposited on the gryphon's back, just where eagle feathers melted into leonine fur. He settled

down, shivering a bit, but only in surprise. Unlike riding a broom, this was deeply warm.

The gryphon sprang into the air. Harry worried for a moment how it would get out of the Manor, and what the effects on the Manor might be of it spreading its wings inside such a small room as the one he had—

And then found he need not have worried. The magic that had him now was at least the equivalent of the wild Darkness of Walpurgis Night, but it was present in greater amounts and in different places. Light surrounded them, and tugged them, and Harry realized they were hurtling along beneath the stars, hundreds of feet off the ground, the dark mass of Britain passing beneath them. He saw how each individual starbeam slanted down to make the gryphon's wings, how it changed in color from gold to silver, and shivered again at the knowledge that only starlight was holding him up. He hoped no clouds came to cover it.

He need not have worried, though. The gryphon was faster than any cloud, and this was a clear summer night. It moved rapidly to the north, and then turned in a direction Harry still thought, though he was dazed by the speed, was west, from the moon. Still they rode from star to star, reformed and recreated from moment to moment. Harry felt the power surging around him all the while. Just because the Light magic chose to use its powers to create a steed and bear him along right now did not mean it wasn't mighty. Indeed, Harry thought that in some ways that the restraint holding it back, confining it to a human scale for the moment, was stronger than the wildness he had witnessed on Walpurgis Night.

Then they slanted down, falling rapidly past trees, and into rolling hills. Harry saw the shape of a house up ahead.

Voldemort and his Death Eaters were outside the house, standing around a blazing bonfire. Voldemort was laughing, and his own power rose around him, a deadly blot on the night.

The gryphon tucked its talons close to its breast. Harry realized they were about to hurtle downwards just in time to ready himself for it, the way that he would when diving on a broom.

The gryphon stooped in at a sharp angle, so sharp that few of the Death Eaters looked up in time to see it come. Of course, few people looked overhead anyway, Harry found. They ducked and cried out once they saw what it was, and Harry saw Voldemort alone calmly hold out his wand and cast a spell, the sound of which was lost in the screams and cries from around him.

The gryphon snapped its head forward, and the beak closed on a tendril of power just extending from Voldemort. Harry held on as the gryphon wheeled hard to the side, talons scraping through the top of the bonfire, drawing substance and strength from the light of the flames.

Magic unraveled from Voldemort along the path of that one trailing thread, and Harry watched in wonder mingled with fear as Voldemort began to lose more and more of the dark aura that had hovered around him. The gryphon rose higher, wings beating madly, scattering sparks from beneath it and starting small fires in the grass, which only built the gryphon's shape as the brightness built. Magic swirled around it, and Harry caught a sense of it, foul and perverted, just like all the power he had ever swallowed from Voldemort had tasted.

The gryphon swallowed it, and then spread its wings wider. The power unspooled from them, cleaned by the passage through its body. It didn't flow back to Voldemort, though, but soared up to the sky, in springing waterfalls and fountains that reminded Harry of the waterfalls and fountains of light when the unicorns were freed. The magic flew back towards the stars, the sun, the moon, the places it had come from first, before Voldemort did whatever he had done to steal it from the Light.

The gryphon had taken only as much magic from Voldemort as he stole, Harry thought, as they swung around again and then took off, soaring upward. It would not care to do more, because its sense of justice was strict. It would answer the crimes against itself. Others

must claim their own share of justice. The Light could not judge for them.

Rather like me, with my parents and Dumbledore, Harry thought, driving his hand deeper into the fur and feathers as they flew. The Death Eaters were crying behind them. Voldemort was not dead, but he had been crippled. Harry found himself smiling. He could hope that this would produce even more divisions within their ranks, as some of them rallied around their Lord and others began to see him as weak—and Dark wizards and witches were not forgiving of weakness.

The gryphon soared from star to star, and it was not long before they reached Malfoy Manor again, and passed in that same ephemeral manner from the light of the stars to the soft moonlight falling through Harry's window. He landed softly in his own bed, lowered by the beak as he had been lifted, and stared into the gryphon's intense eyes.

"How did Voldemort get that magic in the first place?" he whispered. "What did he do?"

The gryphon breathed over his face again, and the answer came to Harry. Voldemort had pretended to be conducting the truce-dance with a being who stood high in the Light, rather like the house elves had once been, using illusion and glamour spells he'd produced even before his fall and had his Death Eaters add to. Pleased by the thought of one of their own dealing with him, and by the thought of a powerful Dark wizard turning to the Light, the ancient rituals had answered, giving him power linked to the sun and the solstices and equinoxes. The linkage to time they could not take back; Voldemort would keep on performing his corrupted truce-dance, sending gifts to the illusionary being at the proper times, and that meant he would gain the closeness to the seasons that any wizard in a similar ritual would. But they could take back the Light magic he had stolen and put to twisted uses, the magic that had kept Harry's own wandless power imprisoned in the graveyard.

Voldemort was still likely to time his attacks on the solstices and equinoxes, Harry understood, following the round of the sun. But the stolen magic meant his raids would no longer be the devastating

force they could have been. He could no longer will something to happen at the moment of sunset as he had in the graveyard.

There was still Dark magic rising, still a storm coming, not least because the Dark magic did remember Voldemort's attempt to cage it at Walpurgis Night, and would not be so forgiving as the Light had been. Harry must watch out at Midsummer, of course, but Midwinter would be worst and wildest, the shortest day, the longest night, the night when the storm of unleashed Dark magic would come for Voldemort—and anyone else who might happen to be standing in its way.

And it would be worse than usual, because there would be no moon on that solstice, no light to counteract the Dark influence. Harry must watch out.

Harry blinked, and there was no gryphon standing in his room, only the moonlight. He let out a deep breath and rolled over, trying to think of what he should do.

For now, he decided at last, go back to sleep. He would wake and confirm the information, and decide what to do with it, in the morning.

"That was fascinating," Argutus said.

Harry jumped, sending his snake to the bed. He'd forgotten that Argutus was there. "You enjoyed it?" he asked.

"Yes. I like it. You are interesting, and you are around interesting things and forces. Interesting things happen to you." Argutus lifted his head back up and touched his tongue to the stump of Harry's left hand. "I like you. I choose you to be my friend."

Harry smiled, extended his arm for the Omen snake to climb up, and rolled over so that both his arms rested on his stomach. For right now, sharp, piercing exhaustion made him too tired for any grander gesture.

Chapter Sixteen: Guilty Until Proven Innocent

Harry grimaced in resignation as Lucius escorted him into the Ministry, one hand planted firmly on his back. Madam Shiverwood had sent an owl yesterday, “inviting” him to come see her today and have his second interrogation—what she would probably call a little talk. Narcissa, however, was gone this morning, talking to Henrietta Bulstrode, probably to answer some subtle questions about whether Harry was up to the ability of leading.

Harry wished he could have gone with her. Facing Henrietta Bulstrode was nothing next to facing Madam Shiverwood.

That left only Lucius to take him to the Ministry, of course, because everyone in the Manor had only given Harry a chilly stare when he suggested that he be allowed to go alone. Harry had bowed his head and not objected, but his heart boiled with objections. What good would one more hostage do in a battle? Voldemort or his Death Eaters could target the people who came with Harry in the sure and certain knowledge that he would die before he permitted them to be hurt. Harry didn’t see why he shouldn’t be allowed to go alone, and if Voldemort or the Death Eaters showed up to fight him again, then that was their problem, and his.

They went straight to the Department of Magical Family and Child Services, Lucius exchanging a few cool nods with those he passed. Harry watched him in amusement, to distract his mind from the upcoming questioning. Lucius had lost prestige in the Ministry when Fudge turned so hysterically to the Light, and the fact that the new Minister was Light-devoted also wouldn’t help him much. But even now there were people who might listen to money, Harry supposed, if not the words of a Dark wizard. And Scrimgeour wouldn’t mind that, even though he might mind Lucius, because Lucius was not a Lord and bribery was one of the means that ordinary wizards used to get things done. He would think it his duty to purge his Ministry of people who could be bribed.

“Here we are.” Lucius halted before Madam Shiverwood’s door. “I trust that you will emerge from your talk at eleven o’clock, Harry?”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry, and sighed, and put his hand on the door.

This time, though it swung open on the same room, it didn’t swing open on the same expression. Madam Shiverwood straightened behind her desk and eyed him sternly.

“Harry,” she said, with a brisk nod. “Please sit down.”

Harry took the chair in front of her desk, observing her thoughtfully. Her eyes tracked his every movement. She had her hands folded, and if anything, they only clamped more tightly on each other as she stared at him. She coughed, and while it was a gentle cough, Harry didn’t think that it marked any gentleness in store for him. Her eyes were too sharp for that.

“Please shut the door,” she said.

Harry gestured, and his wandless magic pushed the office door shut on Lucius’s distantly amused face.

“Yes, well.” Madam Shiverwood shuffled the papers across her desk for a moment, then leaned forward. “I have learned more about the abuse that you suffered, Harry. I have seen all the memories in the Pensieve now, as well as read the reports.” She paused a moment, her nostrils flaring, and then said, “Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

Harry didn’t know what had changed, but he found that he liked this new Madam Shiverwood better. She was certainly off balance, and she seemed to be less intelligent. Perhaps it was just seeing the memories that had disconcerted her. Still, he planned to take advantage of it. “Because my mother made sure the thought would never occur to me, madam,” he said. “She told me that it had to stay secret, so that no one would ever find out that Connor couldn’t do everything himself. And then she told me that no one outside the family would understand. They would say it was evil, but they would never understand how it looked to someone who was actually part of our family.” And that part is still true. “Besides, I never thought of it as abuse at the time.”

“Still, though, what she did to you—” Madam Shiverwood’s hands clenched on her papers. “When did you first start thinking of it as abuse?”

Harry tried to think. The word had occurred to him at the end of his second year, he thought, during those terrible moments in the Chamber of Secrets when the box had burst open and his silent self had eaten part of Voldemort’s magic. “A few months before I turned thirteen,” he said quietly.

“And it still didn’t occur to you to tell anyone?” Madam Shiverwood’s voice was shrill.

“No, for the reasons I laid out to you.” Harry shuffled around in his seat so that he was facing Madam Shiverwood more directly. His chair was still lower than her desk, which he didn’t like, but he was going to make sure that he held every advantage he could. “Why is this so hard to understand?” he added. “Last time, you seemed to know me better than I knew myself.”

“You were abused for so long,” said Madam Shiverwood softly, her hands now clenching on the edges of the desk. “I’m merely trying to understand how you could have reached the age of fourteen before it was reported.”

Harry felt a stirring of impatience. Well, if she’s acting irrational, then she can’t use my own supposed irrationality against me. “I didn’t want anyone to report it,” he said. “If I had my way, it would never have been reported. I can handle forgiving my parents and Dumbledore. There was no reason for anyone else to intrude into what was a private matter of forgiveness and reconciliation.”

“It’s not just about those!” Madam Shiverwood leaned forward across the desk as if she were going to lunge at him. “It’s about justice, and punishment, and seeing that those who hurt you get their due, Harry. Don’t you care that your parents would still have been walking about, free to do whatever they wanted, including hurting you again?”

“If they had hurt someone else, that would have been my fault, and I would have borne the guilt of it,” said Harry, sitting up in the chair and

lifting his chin. "If they hurt me, then I could also bear that. I expected a few more wounds before I could heal them."

"The burden of healing them should never have been up to you," said Madam Shiverwood, softly again, and then looked away from him. Harry saw her wiping tears from her eyes with the corner of one sleeve, and stared. She really is getting too upset. She has to have the ability to stand back from this.

"Has something happened, Madam Shiverwood?" he asked, as gently as he could. "Do you need me to leave?"

Madam Shiverwood blinked at him. "I am crying over you," she said. "You don't seem inclined to shed tears over your own situation." Her eyes were fastened to his face as if nailed there again. "Have you done as I asked, indulging one pleasure or one whim of your own every day?"

Harry flushed, and knew that was answer enough.

"Harry." She whispered his name. "Why?"

"It's stupid," said Harry flatly. "It doesn't have anything to do with healing me. And I can't—" He stopped. What he was going to say next sounded stupid, but then, Madam Shiverwood was already upset. If he said it now, it would just be stupidity and not weakness in front of her, the way it would have been otherwise. "I can't think of that many things I want," he finished.

Madam Shiverwood's eyes grew more alert, though also, Harry thought, brighter with the sheen of tears. She drew a piece of parchment and a quill from her desk drawers and pushed them across the desk to him. Harry sat where he was and made no move to take them, staring at her all the while.

"Make a list of things you like," she said patiently, as though she had already given him the instructions once. "Then we can work out ways for you to have them."

Harry snorted, but leaned forward and floated the parchment and quill to him, bracing them on his leg as he used his hand to write. He saw Madam Shiverwood's eyes dart to the stump of his left wrist, and that same stricken look come over her face. Why? It's not like she had anything to do with the loss of it, and if she's pitying me for losing it, then I may just have to kick her. He lowered his head and began to scribble hard on the parchment.

Helping people.

Healing people.

Giving other people what they want.

After that, it grew harder. Harry hesitated, toying with the quill, and wondered what else he liked and wanted. Oh, of course.

Freeing magical creatures.

Breaking webs.

After that...well. Harry frowned at the parchment, and wondered if he really needed to write down anything else. There were some very minor pleasures that he indulged in sometimes, but a lot of them could be filed under one of those he'd already written. He heard Madam Shiverwood shifting and starting to draw in her breath, though, so he began writing hastily.

Brewing potions.

Flying.

He added that second one reluctantly. Except when he'd flown on his broom to stop the dragons last year, or tired to throw the Quidditch games for Connor, he couldn't really think of a time he'd used his flying to help people. That made it the exact kind of pleasure that Madam Shiverwood wanted him to list, of course, but all it felt to him was wasteful. Harry didn't think he'd be playing Quidditch this year. Why should he? He had other things to do, and catching the Snitch

was a small rush of pleasure compared to the time that training took up.

He handed the parchment back to Madam Shiverwood, and she looked over it in silence. To Harry's irritation, she looked as if she were about to start crying again.

She glanced up at Harry, wiping her cheeks, and said, "We must try to get you a few more selfish pleasures, that's all."

"I don't see why." Harry shifted from side to side in the chair, and wished that he were alone. "If I'm supposed to be recovering from abuse, shouldn't I think about that instead?"

"Because of the unusual circumstances of your case, this does qualify as helping you to recover from abuse," said Madam Shiverwood gently. "I want you to be able to enjoy things for themselves, Harry, or for yourself. Your mother trained you to hate good things—"

"Not hate them," Harry interrupted, thinking this was an important distinction. Otherwise, they might try Lily for something she hadn't really done. "Just do without them. And sometimes panic if someone tries to introduce them to me too insistently." He thought uneasily about the tickling session that Draco had put him through last night. It had been all right until Draco's hands lingered on his skin too long, and then the fear had surged up inside him again.

But that's Draco's province to help me recover from. Not Madam Shiverwood's. Harry folded his arms and stared stubbornly at her.

"That is worse," said Madam Shiverwood quietly. "She has made a fifteen-year-old boy incapable of thinking about having fun." She considered his list again. "From now on, Harry, I want you to do at least one thing every day that pleases you and does not involve helping someone else."

"I can't brew potions or fly every day," Harry protested.

“For now, you can,” said Madam Shiverwood, and then sighed. “Although why I should expect you to obey me now, when you didn’t last time, and you no longer seem as eager about healing from abuse as you were...”

“I am eager,” Harry said. She really just doesn’t understand. “I do want to heal. But I can’t afford to do it in a way that takes up too much time. Lots of people are depending on me.” That ought not to surprise her, at least, if she’d seen the newspaper articles that the Prophet was publishing.

“Healing should be your most important priority right now, Harry,” said Madam Shiverwood. “Other people will understand if you have to wait to help them. And it’s the most important thing I can do, too.”

There is something strange happening here, though I don’t know what memory or magic could have caused it. Harry leaned back in his chair. “But you don’t just handle my case, madam. You handle others. I don’t think you’ll do a service to other abused children by concentrating so hard on me.”

“Right now, the other cases do not need so much of my personal involvement,” said Madam Shiverwood. “The children involved have good relationships with their guardians, or with the parent who did not abuse them, or with other relatives. You have no one who is connected to you in that way, Harry, except your guardian—”

“He’s not my guardian by choice,” said Harry shortly, feeling those uncontrollable emotions that boiled up in him whenever he thought about Snape. But Snape wasn’t here right now, and he would make himself look a fool if he went on about him in front of Madam Shiverwood. After some deep breathing, he managed to calm down and stare her in the eye. “I tried to ask the Minister to strip him of his guardianship. He wouldn’t do it.”

“You need caring adults about you, Harry,” said Madam Shiverwood. “That is becoming quite clear. If the Minister refused to take the office away from Severus Snape, I can only assume that he thinks the man is doing a good job.”

"A good job driving me mad," Harry muttered.

"Why?"

Harry peeked at her from the corner of one eye. This is just the kind of thing she wants to hear about, probably. Well, if I tell it to her, then maybe I can convince her that I do want to heal. The things she recommends that I do just aren't useful, that's all, and take up too much time.

"He probably knows me better than any other adult," Harry admitted grudgingly. "He's rescued me and saved me numerous times, and he doubtless thought he was doing it again." Harry ducked his head, so that the expression in his eyes wouldn't be as visible. "But because he knows me, he knew that I wouldn't forgive him for exposing my parents and Dumbledore to abuse charges. For other crimes, crimes that wouldn't have destroyed them, yes. I could understand why he would do that. But not this kind of crime. Not this kind of charge. It's—what he did is inhuman, and he shouldn't have done it, not when he knows I wouldn't like it."

"Then does that mean a guardian should only do what a child likes?" Madam Shiverwood asked, mild again.

Damn. I never saw that one coming. "No," Harry said. "But that's not the point. The point is that other children need guardians like that, because they can't take care of themselves or deal with the adults who hurt them on their own. Snape knows I could have. That just makes what he's done all the more unforgivable."

"You can forgive your parents, and yet you cannot forgive him?"

"They don't know me," said Harry impatiently. "They only know the boy they think I am, the child they believed they created. Snape knows me, and he went ahead and did it anyway."

"That suggests, to me," said Madam Shiverwood, folding her hands in front of her again, "that he was prepared to lose your love, and even your forgiveness, for the sake of seeing you safe. He took a great risk with this. You might have destroyed him, or done worse than yell at

him, thanks to your magic and your raw emotions. You certainly have turned your back on him. But he will live to see you safe, even if it is not with him. That bespeaks a great love to me. If he does know you better than your parents, as you said he does, then he put the knowledge to good use.”

“If he really does love me, then he would have let me deal with this on my own,” said Harry. “He knew how badly I wanted to.” He was not going to admit that Madam Shiverwood might have a point. Of course, that didn’t prevent him from knowing what would come out of her mouth next.

“And being a guardian is not about indulging all a child’s whims,” she said gently. She leaned back in her chair and studied him. “I would also like you to think about Professor Snape, Harry,” she added. “It’s obvious that you haven’t, that you’ve pushed aside your emotions. Otherwise, I think you would be able to argue better for or against him than this.”

Harry swallowed, and felt as if there were knives in his throat. “And what should I think about, madam? Making him dangle by one hand over a pit of snakes until he apologizes to my parents and Dumbledore?”

“If that is what it takes to make you work through your emotions,” said Madam Shiverwood. “Understand, Harry. I am not saying that you must forgive him. I am only asking you to think about it. You have not done it, and it is obvious that that is slowing you down, and making you clumsy in your emotional responses to him. Healing from the wounds you believe that he inflicted on you is just another part of the healing process. Think about him, imagine conversations with him, dangle him above a snake pit if you must. I know that you are going back to school soon. How will you deal with him then, if you cannot deal with talking about him now?”

Harry had been wondering the same thing, in the back of his mind. But there were so many other things to think about—especially when he was at Malfoy Manor, and Draco was close by—that he tended to let it glide out of his mind, like flowing water. He sighed, and admitted she might have a point.

“All right, madam. I’ll try.”

Madam Shiverwood nodded, satisfied. “And what about indulging one pleasure or whim each day?”

Harry frowned at her. “I feel like I’m a little kid, and you’re telling me to go play outside.”

“I am not doing that, Harry, unless you wish to be outside,” said Madam Shiverwood. “I am encouraging you to go and have fun.”

“That sounds even more childish,” Harry complained.

Madam Shiverwood shook her head slightly. “And if you have looked into the Prophet, you will have noticed that you are a child to many people,” she said. “It is time that you learned to use that, Harry, instead of being difficult about it. If you do want to be more than an abused child, then you should be seizing this chance to grow past it, to learn to have fun and accept pleasure so that you can be a true adult. Unless you think that adults give up all chance of fun and pleasure when they turn eighteen?” she added, and Harry didn’t want to oblige her with a smile, but couldn’t quite resist.

“I suppose,” he said. He didn’t say it, but there was another reason that indulging himself could get to be a bad habit. What if he indulged himself the night before a battle, or when Voldemort made a sudden and violent move against the wizarding world? Then he might not have the concentration and emotional control that he needed in order to be ready for circumstances like that.

“I know it,” said Madam Shiverwood. “I would like you to write down your promise this time, Harry, and sign your name to it. Or your promises, rather, since I would also like you think about your guardian.” She pushed the parchment and quill back towards him.

Reluctantly, but cheered at the thought of actually pushing these stupid, crippling things behind him, Harry took up the parchment and wrote.

Lucius did not idle outside the door once he had given Harry over into Madam Shiverwood's tender care. He strolled down the hall, instead, reached the lifts, and casually took them to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

A few people stared at him as he walked in, but most of them didn't look up from their paperwork, or prudently pretended not to catch his eye. Lucius had a few friends here. Up until a year and a half ago, before Fudge's little attack of paranoia, he had even been a common sight on some days. Lucius didn't let either the stares or the carefully averted eyes bother him, of course, as he walked casually to the door of his closest friend in the Ministry and knocked.

Time to renew an old acquaintance.

The door opened almost at once. It was warded to do that if the person who knocked was one that Aurelius Flint trusted. Lucius didn't know what happened if someone knocked whom he distrusted. Perhaps it blew up in their faces. Aurelius was disturbingly good with hexes.

"Lucius," said Aurelius, looking up and regarding him with flat, blank black eyes. Lucius had to admire the man's control. It was like being looked at by a beetle. Not nearly as charming as Lucius's own coldness, of course, which he could adjust by several degrees of warmth as the situation required, but Aurelius didn't work in a position where he needed the charm. He was, to most appearances, merely a minor paper-pusher in his Department. To those who looked with knowing eyes, he was a source of information, a node in the web where many strands met. "What can I do for you?"

"Many things," said Lucius, and heard the door shut behind him. He sat down in front of Aurelius's desk, easy, not afraid, though he knew he was in a room the man sitting opposite him had covered with death traps. "For starters, do you know how closely allied I am to the Potters?"

Only a flicker in the deep eyes showed that that wasn't the question Aurelius was expecting. He sat back, though, and slung a leg over his

desk, as casual as Lucius was. "Your son's pretty close friends with their older boy, I hear."

Lucius smiled. "Not just friends, Aurelius. They'll be joined one day."

"Who told you that? Boys never know their own feelings at that age." Aurelius was grimacing, no doubt remembering the disastrous marriage he'd nearly entered when he was sixteen. Lucius still thought it was the funniest story he'd ever heard.

"Narcissa."

After a moment's consideration, Aurelius inclined his head in acceptance. "And you want to see your in-laws, or the people who will be your in-laws, and congratulate them on having produced a son who can expect to be allied with a Malfoy?" he asked.

Lucius leaned closer. "Well, not congratulate them. That would be rather too strong a word. But I do think that we should be in communication. After all, I've never had a chance to talk to Lily or James Potter since we fought on opposite sides in that large misunderstanding of the War, when I was under Imperius." Aurelius's smile at that would have done a shark credit, Lucius thought. "Who can help me with that?"

Aurelius closed his eyes, no doubt rifling through the mental files in his head. It was remarkable, Lucius thought, how he kept the information organized like that. He never wrote anything about his contacts down, because he didn't need to. That, of course, contributed greatly to his not getting caught. He would know who could be bribed, who was in desperate need of a favor, who was on the brink of getting sacked for drinking, but he wouldn't have so much as a scrap of a note bearing that person's name anywhere in his office.

"Richard Nott," said Aurelius, opening his eyes. "He has a contact who's rotating as a guard on the Potter cells."

"And what would Nott want?" Lucius asked, cocking an eyebrow. He remembered Richard. A disappointment to his family when he

became an Auror, especially when his first adventure in the field resulted in him acquiring a wound that couldn't be completely healed, and put him in the Ministry doing light work for the rest of his career. Of course, Richard wouldn't admit that he was wrong and come home, being pig-headed. All the Notts were like that.

"Why, just a bit of dragonweed," said Aurelius. "A bit more than he's supposed to have, thanks to his wound nagging him. Not much, you understand. Merlin knows that I don't want the poor fellow dead."

Lucius nodded, and let a faint smile grace his lips. He would provide Nott with his dragonweed, and Nott would get his contact on the cells—the nature of whose debt to Nott Lucius didn't know, and didn't need to—to make sure that Lucius could chat with James and Lily Potter to his heart's content. "No one would want that," he said, and stood, with a small inclination of his head to Aurelius. "Helpful as always, my old friend."

Aurelius simply nodded. He and Lucius were perhaps not friends, but Lucius genuinely had saved his life, and asked only to be included in his information web as payment for the debt that had incurred. Lucius kept doing small favors for him on occasion, of course, including insuring that his son Marcus had a little extra help on his NEWTS the second year he took them, so that he could actually pass and leave Hogwarts. No need to lose such a valuable friend.

Lucius left with a spring in his step to pick up Harry. Depending on when Nott's contact could get him in to see the Potters, he might have to be prepared on a moment's notice. That was no trouble. He had the blank wand, and the owner of the Magical Menagerie had owled him yesterday. A shipment of insects had arrived, bearing his name. Their food was included with them, so they would stay alive until he had need of them. He only needed to go to Diagon Alley and pick them up.

Everything is going well. Of course, why should it not? The world is ordered around the strong, and I am that.

Harry stood uneasily holding his Firebolt and studying the sky. It was clear, late afternoon, in the first throes of sunset. The only good thing about this therapy that Madam Shiverwood had ordered him to do

was that it encouraged Narcissa to extend his bedtime past dusk. Harry had come to think that punishment more and more unfair as the summer advanced and the days grew shorter and shorter.

But now...

Now he had to go flying, and he wasn't sure what would happen when he did. Even granting that all the Malfoys were staying carefully in their Manor, and not looking out the windows to watch him, either, he was afraid of what they might see.

Harry was afraid that he would act like a child when he was flying, and that would undo at least some of the respect he'd built up in Lucius and Narcissa's eyes.

Or maybe he was just afraid to do something that felt pleasant, because that would undo other barriers he'd raised, and urge him on a quest for more, more, more.

Harry took a deep breath, slung a leg over his Firebolt, and took off.

He rose faster than he had intended to, and felt fear brush him for a moment. And then it was gone, and he was remembering the speed and strength of the Firebolt from the last time he'd ridden it, and the exaltation that had flooded him when he flew as a child lifted him up and cradled him.

He was laughing. It didn't matter. He circled under the summer sunset, and the gold and the green and the blue seemed to sink into him and pierce him like blades, and that didn't matter, either.

He flew in another circle, then dropped to the ground. The plunge was straight downward. Harry watched the grass grow clearer and more distinct, felt the wind whip tears from his eyes, and laughed and laughed and laughed.

At least he knew none of the Malfoys were watching now, or one of them would have been outside and screaming at him.

At the last moment, Harry flipped backwards, pulling the broom over and around with him, so that he tumbled bristles over head over bristles, and felt the grass kiss his hair like Draco sometimes liked to do, when he thought Harry wouldn't notice. Harry turned around, rolling, so close that he scraped his elbow on the ground, and then blasted back into the sky.

He felt his blood up, hammering through his veins and singing in his ears. For once, for once, that wasn't because of battle. He could almost see Madam Shiverwood's point in that moment, that perhaps sometimes he could be a child, and it wouldn't hurt, that it might even help him become a better adult...

He was back to racing across the sky, and the moment was lost, and he was glad. He didn't really want to think right now. He wanted to lift, then dive in a jagged, zigzagging pattern that made an owl setting out from the house dodge him and squawk. Harry chased her for a few moments, then rolled over and dropped towards the ground again, flying upside-down this time.

He gathered his strength and speed before he reached the grass, imagined the ground as a Bludger, and darted sideways so sharply that he felt his neck wrench. But that was all right, that was all right, it was all right as long as he could lift straight up and balance in the air, cocking his head to ease the pain and whirling twice. He didn't need to think about anything up here, and he wasn't afraid of falling or being hurt, because he knew how to fly. He could indulge his love for risk-taking here, and no one would yell at him.

Individual movements blended into a great flood of fiery sweetness then, and Harry didn't think like an adult until he landed back on the ground, as the sky was raining blue from above and the sun was setting. He laughed and bent over, wheezing, then rubbed the side of his neck, and realized he'd changed his mind.

As long as the Quidditch team still wanted him, he thought he'd be playing this year after all.

Chapter Seventeen: Like Rational Adults

"I don't know if I'll ever see you again."

Harry blinked and looked up from the letter McGonagall had sent him, then stood and extended his hand to Vince as he walked across the library. "I know," he said quietly. "I don't think that you'd be safe from your father as long as you stayed in England."

Vince nodded. "It—it wouldn't have been so bad if I'd just done something to embarrass him in private," he said. "But he can't stand being humiliated in public." He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. "Mr. Malfoy is going to open the Floo so that my aunt can come through at one. But you're going to be gone then, aren't you?"

"Yeah." Harry glanced at the letter he'd half-crumpled. "Headmistress McGonagall wants me to come to Hogwarts a little early and meet some people she's hiring for this school year. I already know them, but she thought I should have the time to get used to them." It was bizarre, what she'd written. Acies Lestrangle was teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts? Remus returning to be Head of Gryffindor was minor, next to that.

There was something else McGonagall had written, too, but Harry was only going to think about that when he had to.

"I almost wish I could stay," mused Vince, then straightened and shook his head. "Thank you for saving my life," he said formally. "I owe you a Life Debt, and if you ever call on me to fulfill it, then I will."

Harry nodded. He knew he wouldn't be claiming that debt, though. Vince was lucky to still be alive, and Harry wouldn't jeopardize his safety again. Let him enjoy as much peace as might be left in France while he could. Harry hoped to stop the war before it spread that far.

Vince looked as if he wanted to say something more, but in the end he shook his head and left. Harry picked up the letter and scanned the last lines one more time. They hadn't changed. He put it in his robe pocket.

“Harry?”

Draco’s head had popped up from one of the chairs in front of the hearth. Harry turned that way with a small grin. Draco had an anxious frown on his face, as if something had changed between them because he wouldn’t be accompanying Harry to Hogwarts that day; Narcissa would escort him instead.

“You understand?” Draco said now, just like he had earlier. “I’m sorry, but I really need a certain angle of sunlight for this spell to work the way I want it to, and I want to do it today—”

“Of course I understand,” said Harry, and he did. Draco had already modified a spell that he wanted to try, something to do with Ancient Runes and confining his mind in his own body. He’d said he could even adapt it to protect his body during battle, if and when he did manage to train himself to use the possession gift as a weapon. Harry was happy to see him taking the time and the care to develop an interest of his own. Elfrida might be right about Draco’s time apart from Harry being his own choice, but since he had made that choice before they knew anything about McGonagall’s letter, Harry wasn’t about to deprive him of it.

He hesitated for a moment then, but he had already decided that part of overcoming his fear was making the overcoming a casual part of everyday life. He walked over to Draco and kissed his forehead. When he drew back, Draco was staring at him with wide eyes.

Harry didn’t give him the chance to question. Narcissa was waiting by one of the other Floo connections to escort him to Hogwarts. He extended his left arm for Argutus, who had been curled on the back of Draco’s chair, enjoying the glimpses of the colored runes in the book he read. He coiled drowsily on Harry’s shoulder now. Harry hid a grin. The Omen snake would wake up fast enough when they bumped and jostled from fireplace to fireplace.

“Harry—”

Harry nodded at Draco. "Can't talk right now. Got to go." He hurried out of the library before he could let himself think about what he'd just done in either embarrassment or approval. Fawkes appeared above him, briefly, to flit a wing, and then soared away. The phoenix saw no reason to take a Floo journey with either Harry or that snake, Harry suspected.

"Mr. Potter. Thank you for coming."

Harry straightened from the bumpy fireplace crossing into the connecting room to the Headmistress's office, brushed soot off his robe, and listened in amusement to Argutus's outraged complaints while he nodded to McGonagall. "Thank you for inviting me, Pro—Headmistress." He hesitated a moment. "Are the people you wanted me to meet with here yet?"

McGonagall, who had been engaged in a staring contest with Narcissa, blinked and returned his gaze a moment later. Harry had taken in the room in the meantime. It was small and dusty, filled with odd objects that had little dust themselves. Harry recognized them as the silver instruments from Dumbledore's shelves, apparently heaped here because McGonagall had nowhere else to put them. There were no exits except the door she stood in front of and the hearth they'd come in by. Harry tensed minutely, but a voice from the Headmistress's office gave him something else to think about.

"I'm here at least, Harry, and looking forward to seeing you."

Harry edged forward and peered shyly—he couldn't help it—around McGonagall into the office.

Remus Lupin sat in a chair on the other side of the enormous desk that Dumbledore had so often used to make himself look stern, studying what looked like a Pensieve on the desktop. He glanced up swiftly at the small movement, though, and Harry froze at the sight of his face.

He looked so much more relaxed Harry could hardly believe it was him. His hair was covered in gray streaks, as it had been from the time he and Connor were children, but they looked natural now, as

though Remus had finally accepted that they could make him look dignified. His eyes were a deep, pure amber that Harry couldn't entirely attribute to the full moon, since that was still almost two weeks away. And when he smiled and moved forward, holding his hand out, he had a confident stride that Harry had never associated with him. Remus had cringed most of the time, as if he were apologizing for existing. This man didn't cringe.

Harry took his hand and stared up at him (Remus, like most of the people Harry came into contact with, was still taller than he was, something that caused Harry no small edge of resentment).

"What—" Harry shook his head, embarrassed that awe was cutting off his voice, but sure that Remus would guess the question without needing to hear it.

Remus laughed, and the sound was one that Harry had never heard, either, though its closest resemblance was to Hawthorn's, since hers also ended in a little half-bay. "The Sanctuary, Harry. The Seers are very good with not only confronting someone with the truth of his soul, but making him face up to that truth, once he's accepted it. And, in this case, I decided that I wanted to reflect more of my strengths, instead of hiding them." He cocked his head and sniffed openly at Harry. "You smell of pain. It would have done you good to go there."

"I don't want to match what my soul looks like."

Remus shrugged, and then went back over to his chair to drop into it. Harry followed and sat across from him, barely aware of Narcissa coming to stand behind his seat and McGonagall taking her place behind her desk. "Sometimes we still have the choice, that's true," he said. "And I can understand your not wanting to be so separated from the world. But it was fine for me."

"What was it like?" Harry asked—unwilling, but thinking he had to.

Remus smiled. "Deeply peaceful," he answered. "I don't think I can paint a complete picture for someone who hasn't been there. And I think you're imagining fights of some kind, Harry, where the Seers try to confront someone with the mirror of his soul and don't let him turn

away. It's nothing of the kind. You can rest and think of nothing until you're ready to think of healing."

He lifted his head, and his smile grew brighter, sharper. "They helped me remember that it's not my fault I'm a werewolf. I was bitten as a child, and I never asked to be. But I do know about the heightened anger that comes with having had the curse since I was so young. I do need to control that better. So I will." Remus didn't sound as if he were apologizing, simply stating a fact. "And they have learned how to brew the Wolfsbane Potion, and they have immense forests within the Sanctuary. I ran across them as a werewolf, and learned to glory in my strength and my speed." He laughed abruptly. "And I picked up a strange and serene manner of speaking that won't at all do for the rest of the wizarding world."

"It will do wonderfully for the Gryffindors, Remus," McGonagall murmured. "Never doubt that."

Remus nodded to her, and fixed his eyes on Harry, their amber going deep and sad once more. "I am going to ask your apologies for the weakness I once exhibited," he said. "Now, I can see it for what it was—too much love of my friends, impinging on what I should have done, and what I knew to be right. And though I loved Albus, though he was my mentor and the only person who knew what I was beforehand and welcomed me to Hogwarts anyway, I should have seen the depth of his corruption when he asked us to leave you defenseless in front of Voldemort." He had only the smallest twitch at the name, Harry was impressed to see. "So. Will you forgive me?"

"Yes," said Harry. "I didn't blame you, Remus, not nearly as much as I blamed—well, some of the others." No need to go about casting blame, when that would only hinder the healing. "And you've become the kind of person I think won't make those mistakes again." This time, he stood up and put out his arms.

Remus came and embraced him without further prompting. Harry was amused to hear the rasp of wood against cloth—Narcissa's wand coming forth from her pocket. Does she really think that I'm in danger with Remus? I would be in as much danger with Hawthorn.

“Where’s Peter?” he asked, when he could step away, Remus’s hands lingering on his back for an uncomfortably long time, and Remus had resumed his own seat with a quick, lithe movement.

Remus sighed. “He’s gone to the Aurors already. He thought about coming to Hogwarts and saying hello to you, but he was almost sure someone would see and report him, and then he would look like even more of a fugitive than he already does.” He paused, gazing deeply into Harry’s eyes. “You know the whole mess with Sirius will have to come out for him to have a chance at being free again?”

Harry nodded. “I understand.” He’d viewed a few more of the memories in Sirius’s Pensieve, this time ones from his childhood that showed how profoundly he’d been hurt and driven to try and rely on himself before anyone else, and he knew that Sirius—as he had been, really, before Voldemort possessed him—wouldn’t want Peter to keep silent and try to spare him pain. Sirius had gone where he couldn’t feel it.

“Good.” Remus smiled again. “I haven’t seen Connor yet, but Minerva is planning to make sure we can meet the first night before term and he can get an idea of me. Right now, it’s unsafe for him to leave his hiding place. Death Eaters have been prowling around it.”

Harry nodded with a faint frown. Sometimes, he wondered whether it wouldn’t be better if everyone knew the truth about his having been the one who deflected Voldemort’s curse. That would at least concentrate the Death Eaters’ attention on Harry himself, and make them leave his brother alone.

He put the idea in the back of his mind to think about later. Perhaps he could get Evan Rosier to spread the word among his former comrades for him. In the meantime, the door was opening.

“Thank you for coming in like a normal person, Acies.” McGonagall’s voice was perfectly correct, but she spoke with the same coolness that her stare to Narcissa conveyed. “Harry, this is Acies Lestrangle, who will be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts as Acies Merryweather.” There was a question in her words that Harry thought he put to rest by standing, turning around, and bowing.

"It's good to see you again, Madam Lestrangle," he said, while Acies's cloaked figure leaned against the wall.

"And you, Mr. Potter." Acies tugged the hood of her cloak down.

Harry couldn't help tensing—the last time she had done that, in the meeting during Halloween last year when he had seen her for the first time, he had met a pair of eyes that seared him. Now, though, he could see that Acies Lestrangle was a pale-faced woman with long dark hair that had just the slightest hint of a metallic sheen to it when she turned her head, like scales. Her eyes were large and gray.

Briefly, they caught his. Harry jumped as he saw the same wildness he'd glimpsed last year.

"I can control my gaze," said Acies. "But it is difficult. I shall look no student in the eye for long when I teach my classes. Have you been practicing Defense, Mr. Potter? How good at it are you?"

Harry blinked, but answered, "About as good as could be expected, I suppose. None of the teachers except Remus ever really put us through our paces." He smiled at Remus, who gave him a comfortable grin back.

"Don't listen to Harry, Madam Merryweather," he said. He didn't even stumble on the name. Harry supposed he'd had a few days to get used to it, though. "He was excellent at all the spells I showed the class, as he is at all defensive magic. And, of course, he has more experience at identifying Light and Dark, and balancing between them, than any ten wizards."

"Is that so?" Acies's voice was low and thoughtful. "Then perhaps I will have to drill you a bit harder than the others, Mr. Potter."

"I would welcome the chance to learn more," said Harry, "now that the war is begun."

"Everyone knows the war has begun." Acies waved one hand as if to show that she thought little of such general knowledge, even as she

tugged the hood of her cloak back over her face. "It is in the words of the Muggles, though they do not recognize the signs, and the songs of the sirens that throb through the water, and the bang of the mountain trolls' clubs upon the ground. And, of course, the dragons are singing with it."

"Have you been among the dragons, then?" Harry wondered if he dared ask for news of them. He had known no dragons but the three he freed last year, but he hoped they were well. No telling if they were the dragons that Acies had seen, though.

"Oh, yes," said Acies. "Wandering, and soaking in their music, and breathing it back to them. War and vates, war and vates, those are the substances of their talk. They see far and clearly, even as I do. They know that storms are coming." Harry, remembering what the Light had shown him about the storm coming on Midwinter night, started. "And they plan to be here to offer their help when the storms come. Their bodies are made of music, and they will need much music. But that will be no trouble for the wild Dark, and when Midsummer comes, the air itself will cry out the symphony."

Not at all sure what that meant, but comforted, Harry nodded. "It's going to be very interesting having you for a teacher, Madam Le—Merryweather," he said, deciding that he'd better get used to the name now.

"Is it?" Acies moved her head restlessly. "I would not know. I am not teaching myself, of course."

Harry could hear Narcissa making a low, puzzled noise behind him. He didn't know why. She was one of those who had first introduced him to Acies, after all, and she must have known her longer. He smiled, unable to help himself, and wondered what his yearmates would think of Acies. Perhaps she would be a perfectly ordinary teacher, but somehow, when she was talking about dragons and music with this intensity, he doubted it.

Then someone knocked on the door of the office.

And Harry remembered the last lines of McGonagall's letter, the other person she had said she wanted him here early to meet. He found his magic surging about him like grass whipped by the wind, and Acies cocked her head. Remus whispered, "Harry?" in a low, concerned voice, and Narcissa's hand gripped his shoulder.

"Since Harry is returning to Hogwarts," said McGonagall calmly, "I asked him to come here early to meet those professors he might be uncomfortable with. And that includes the one he is most uncomfortable with. I will have my teachers and Mr. Potter, since he is not a child, behave like rational adults." She stood and looked at Harry. "Are you ready, Mr. Potter?"

Her formal tone, and the name she called him, gave him time to steady himself. Harry glanced at Remus, Narcissa, and Acies. "I am, Headmistress. May I ask that I talk to Professor Snape alone?"

"No," said McGonagall, making Harry blink. "You will be around many other people at Hogwarts, Mr. Potter, including the students in your Potions class. I think it best for you to relearn how to interact in front of an audience immediately. I do not ask for warmth from you," she added, her voice dropping a notch. "Only rationality."

Harry thought he could do that. He'd lain awake thinking about Snape last night, and even talking to Argutus, and that had worn a little of his rage out. It helped that Argutus was crawling around on his shoulder to face the door now, flicking out his tongue and saying, "Am I going to see the one you were angry about? I wonder what he is like. I wonder what would happen if I squeezed around his wrist. But I shall only try to do that if he threatens you. It is useless to threaten without any reason." He sounded as if he were trying that one out as a philosophical pronouncement.

"All right," Harry said quietly.

"Come in, Severus," McGonagall called, and then the door opened, and Snape was there. Though he couldn't have known how they would be arranged in the room, his eyes went to Harry immediately and stayed there.

Harry stared back. Snape looked as he looked most of the time: pressed to the edges of his patience in having to continually deal with idiots. He bore a faint redness to his hands that Harry thought meant he must have scrubbed off the latest of a batch of Potions ingredients before he came to the Headmistress's office. Argutus flicked his tongue out and remarked, "He smells like dead things."

"He would not forgive you for saying so," Harry said, with his head turned towards the Omen snake, and then faced Snape again. He tried to keep his expression blank, his gaze and voice both as steady as always. "Hello, sir," he said.

"Hello, Harry." That was unfair, Harry thought, because Snape was not obeying the law McGonagall had laid down and acting entirely like a rational adult. He spoke with less than the warmth he would have displayed most of the time, but his voice was not cold, either. And he looked as if he were studying Harry, giving silent approval to the way he looked—as if he were worried about his health or his mental state or both, and were concerned about him when they'd been apart for the summer.

Harry ground his teeth. What right did Snape have to look at him that way? Even if Madam Shiverwood had a point and he had done the wrong thing for the moral motives, that didn't mean that he had to stare that way, as if he were a parent and Harry were his child. He was a guardian. That was all.

Except that if he did make a deliberate sacrifice of my love and respect, I doubt he thinks about it that distantly.

That just made him want to scream, so Harry shoved the thought away and locked it in a dark closet. He wondered what else he should say. The other people in the room all looked as if they thought the conversational burden should be on him, and Snape was apparently content to remain silent, his eyes devouring all sorts of little things about Harry that Harry had hoped he wouldn't be able to see.

Harry picked what he thought was a safe topic, after a moment of thinking. "How are you getting on with your potions brewing, sir?" he asked, and only heard his words after they were out and he saw

McGonagall's quick disapproving look—sharp enough to cut glass. He winced and made some effort to relax his jaw.

“Well enough,” said Snape equitably. “I shall soon have the hospital wing restocked. One benefit of being at Hogwarts most of the summer, unable to leave because Death Eaters are hunting for me.”

And then he dropped the conversation again, and Harry had to choose something else. The silence rolled on like boulders. Finally, he said, “Are you eager for the term to begin, sir?”

“Of course,” said Snape, and now his eyes were sharper, and he was speaking as he might have if they were alone, which was also unfair, because he had taken care not to act like such a—such a parent when he and Harry were in front of an audience in the past. “Along with the idiots that I must teach, there are the few students who have both the interest in Potions and the skills to make teaching them worthwhile. And my ward returns to Hogwarts with them. I have missed him.”

Harry closed his eyes. He would have to calm down and not snap. McGonagall would not understand what was wrong if he snapped now. No one would, except perhaps Argutus and Remus, who could smell his emotions. They probably all thought this was kind, as close to caring as Snape ever got.

And it was. But it was not kind to do as he was now, speaking in a way that Harry wasn't ready to respond to, and couldn't answer honestly without sounding like a child.

A few more impatient, huffed breaths, and Harry was ready to step in a new direction. “How many students do you anticipate having in your NEWT class this year, Professor?” he asked. A safe topic. A neutral topic. A topic that Snape could not possibly twist back around to him, because Harry had not even taken his OWLS yet.

“Seven or eight,” said Snape. “Perhaps even a smaller number next year. But I am assured of at least three next year: Mr. Malfoy, Miss Granger, and yourself.”

Harry swallowed. Then he said, "Professor McGonagall, I trust that I've demonstrated my self-control to your satisfaction?" He turned his back on Snape. "I'd like to go home now, please, Narcissa." She'd told him to call her that, and he didn't often do it even now, but he just couldn't take any more of this. At least during Potions class, he and Snape wouldn't have time for this kind of private, killing conversation.

"Of course, Harry," said Narcissa, and escorted him back in the direction of the side room and the fireplace.

Harry tilted his head in response to Remus's soft farewell, but didn't show any reaction when Snape spoke his name—just once, with a deep mingling of several emotions in that single word. Madam Shiverwood might be right, but Snape could not simply demand forgiveness and have that forgiveness come to him. How could he? And why would he want to flay Harry alive with his words, if he were not taking pleasure in this?

I think she's overestimated Severus Snape. But Merlin knows I did that.

Snape stood still and watched Harry go with regret pressing against his heart like a knife-blade.

He knew, now, that he should have analyzed the ice of Harry's responses and met it with ice of his own. Then perhaps they could have eased past those awkward initial moments and forged the cool but working relationship the Headmistress wanted them to have. He could show how much he'd missed Harry, which was a perfectly sincere emotion, later in the school year.

Instead, he'd been tempted by the ice into thinking that Harry didn't realize his guardian missed him, and he'd lowered his defenses.

And now he hurt, and Harry probably thought him insincere.

Snape sighed. There was no easy path to take with a child like Harry, and no getting that easily out of what he had done. He knew that, intellectually, and yet he kept hoping for every confrontation to turn out better than it had.

Sometimes I am a fool.

But he was not so great a fool as to give up and retreat, or go cold again, the way he might have done last year. He would simply remain on the horizon, and not let Harry forget either what he had done or his motives for doing so. Harry looked healthy, but there was that depth in the back of his eyes that Snape knew spoke of loneliness, of too great a control. He obviously felt unwilling to simply let go of his emotions with the Malfoys the way he sometimes had with Snape.

He needs a guardian. He needs a parent. I will be there when he remembers or realizes that.

"It's not your fault, Severus." Lupin had actually stood and pressed his hand. "Harry's hurting right now, and the only thing he knows how to do is curl up and hide his pain. He'll come around eventually."

Snape wanted to snap at the bloody werewolf—just because Lupin had changed did not mean Snape had forgotten or forgiven what he had done the last time he was at Hogwarts—but he caught the Headmistress's frown and remembered what she had said about all the Hogwarts professors acting like rational adults. "Thank you, Lupin," he managed to say, between only slightly gritted teeth.

Draco studied the angle of sunlight coming through the window of the room he'd chosen for practice, and nodded once, wiping his hands off on his trousers as he stepped into the circle of runes he'd drawn on the floor. The runes were standard protection designs, but they weren't usually combined with ones for confinement; most protection circles kept people safe and baleful influences out, without caging those they defended like prisoners. Draco didn't know exactly what would happen when a circle was made to keep the baleful influence in with him.

He thought it would work. It was half a ring of protection combined with half a ring of confinement, though not as simply as having them meet in the middle; instead, Draco had drawn one kind of rune, then another, then the first kind again, until they were thoroughly mixed. It was the first idea he'd had, and he thought it was a good one.

He was sure it would work.

Well.

Pretty sure.

It was supposed to come alive when the sunlight struck the outer side of the ring of runes, which was an idea Draco had taken from Harry's description of the truce-dance. That was linked to sunlight and the passage of time, and it seemed to be pretty damn powerful magic. He wanted his rune circle to be the same way.

He watched. The sunlight crept across the floor, and crept, and crept, and then it struck the outermost rune of protection, falling at the same time on one of the runes of confinement.

The designs blazed, turning golden and white, so brilliant that Draco couldn't look at them. He sat down in the middle of the ring and closed his eyes, then tried to jump with his mind the way he'd practiced with Harry, reaching for his father—the only other person in the house right now, since Harry and his mother hadn't come back from Hogwarts yet, and Vince had already left with his aunt.

He bounced back, so hard that he went sprawling on the floor. Draco blinked and gasped, then grinned.

I did it. On my first try, I invented a spell! Well, a rune circle, not a spell, but still! I did it.

He sat up, flushed with success, and reached out to leave the circle. Since the runes had taken him so long to draw, he would leave them here, he thought, and use them again, testing and strengthening them.

The white-gold light bounced his arm back.

Frowning, Draco lunged forward with the full weight of his body behind his arm. This time, he nearly skidded to the other side of the circle. The confinement and protection runes beneath the place he'd

tried to leave the ring were both lit, he saw, and only subsided into sparks as he remained still.

What he had done came to him quickly, of course. The confinement runes were working to keep his possession still, and didn't want his mind to leave the circle. The protection runes would hold his body safe in cases where someone outside the circle tried Imperius or a similar spell to get him to leave it, and they were identifying his possession gift as that kind of influence.

He couldn't just reach down and smudge the runes, either, since they spat sparks at him when he came near. He would have to wait until the sunlight moved across the circle, or perhaps until Harry came back and could use his magic to dispel the influence of the runes.

Draco sighed. Then he grinned, because he couldn't help grinning.

It almost worked perfectly. I still did it. I still made a spell circle. And I did it without Harry's help. Harry doesn't even know Ancient Runes.

He savored the small glow of pride that came with that, and sat down, patiently, to wait the sunlight or the passage of time out.

Chapter Eighteen: Hogwarts Again

Harry could feel his face turning red. He stepped back behind the corner of the hallway and blinked at nothingness.

Well. Of all the ways he had expected to come upon his brother, that hadn't been one of them.

He and Draco had arranged to come through one of the Malfoy fireplaces into the Headmistress's office. Harry had thought, probably with too much innocence, that they would be riding the Hogwarts Express to school. But Draco had given him a patient look, and Narcissa had explained that going to London just to ride the train was too dangerous for Harry, that of course it was much better to have him go into the school this way, where he could be protected. Lucius had said nothing at all. The expression, or rather non-expression, on his face proclaimed too clearly that Harry should have known better.

Harry had the feeling that he wouldn't be bored with the Malfoys, whatever else he might feel while he was with them. They simply changed too often to keep him other than occupied.

McGonagall had told him, smiling when he asked, that yes, Connor was already here. He'd been taken shopping in Diagon Alley yesterday under a glamour, and then come through a fireplace from his hiding spot, escorted by a veritable army of Weasleys. He'd met Remus already, and seemed happy enough about it. No, she didn't know where he was now, only that he'd taken his things up to Gryffindor Tower. Harry should seek him there, but hurry, because they really didn't have that much time before the Sorting Feast began.

Harry had asked Draco, with a smile that he knew usually made Draco do things for him, to take his things down to the dungeons. Draco had agreed before he realized what he was doing. Then he glared, but Harry was gone, hurrying towards the Tower. He didn't know the password, but he didn't have to. He'd wait outside the Fat Lady's portrait for Connor to come out if he had to, and knowing what she was like, he might even be able to charm her into letting him in.

Instead, he'd found Connor already outside the Tower, waiting in the corridor.

Well. Not waiting so much as snogging Parvati Patil.

Harry waited until he thought the wet sounds had stopped, and then casually put his head around the corner again. Connor was standing with his hands on Parvati's shoulders and his forehead resting against hers; at least Parvati was shorter than both of them, to Harry's intense delight. He whispered something to her. Parvati said something back, which, miraculously, did not seem to end in a giggle.

Harry decided that he could show himself now. He coughed and stepped into plain sight.

Connor jumped, and then he smiled, even as he flushed bright red. Parvati only laughed at the sight of Connor's face, at least until she turned around and saw who it was. Harry noticed that her eyes narrowed immediately and she turned on her heel, walking towards the portrait with a sharp shake of her head.

His brother hurried towards him, and Harry decided that questions could wait. Connor hugged him, and Harry hugged him back, hard. They hadn't parted under the best of circumstances last time. Letters were no substitute for the apologies that Harry wanted to make.

"Connor," he murmured. "I know I already wrote this, but I was wrong to say the things that I did to you at the Weasleys'." He pulled back, studying Connor's hazel eyes and wondering if he was forgiven.

Connor just rolled his eyes indulgently. "Of course you were wrong, Harry. You were so ridiculous that it was easy to forgive you. At least, well, it was once I got over being angry at you for doing something else stupid. Only you would go home and try to rebuild yourself entirely."

Harry sighed, and some part of him relaxed for the first time since the battle with Voldemort. He felt able to nod after Parvati now. "What is she doing here already?" he asked. "I thought she was going to ride the Hogwarts Express?"

Connor laughed. "She was, but she got her parents to fly her down on their brooms instead. She knew that I was going to be here early, and she wanted to see me." He lowered his head, and the flush grew fiercer. "She wasn't, ah, very happy that I couldn't see her all summer."

"I think I missed something," said Harry. He paused as Argutus wriggled out on his shoulder, but Connor just nodded at the Omen snake; thanks to the letters Harry had written him, he needed no introduction. Harry cocked his head at his brother. "I had no idea that you, well, fancied her that much. I thought you went with her to the Yule Ball and snogged her a few other times, and that was all."

"Um."

Harry wasn't about to let this go. It was the first time in months he'd had some sort of advantage over his brother, moral or otherwise, and he pressed down. "Perhaps there was some more snogging that I missed, then. Or even more than that. Perhaps there was a romantic proposal of marriage?"

"Shut up," Connor informed him. "No, there wasn't. I fancy her, sure, Harry, but I'm not going that far yet."

Harry just nodded, and tried to think up another good dig. Before he could, Connor added, "Besides which, I don't think that you have much room to talk. You might not want to write about it, but I knew that Malfoy fancied you last year before you did, and I didn't think he'd let it go. How has that been going, Harry?"

"I think the Feast is starting," said Harry, and walked away while he still had some dignity intact.
He hadn't realized it would be so hard.

Oh, yes, there were the newspaper articles, and there had been that embarrassing scene with so many people coming up to him in Diagon Alley. But since the start of summer—no, before that, since he had come back from the graveyard—Harry had only been around people

who had done as much as they could to avoid staring at him, even when they pushed him to face harsh truths. He had forgotten that most of the students and professors in the Great Hall would have been devouring the news of the child abuse charges for two months now, that, to some of them, he was the main reason that Headmaster Dumbledore was now in prison.

He had even managed to forget that most of them still thought he had a left hand.

Heads turned to orient on him as he hurried in through the doors of the Great Hall and over to the Slytherin table, only a short distance behind the returning students from his House. Harry met pair after pair of eyes, and saw intense wonder, or intense pity, or, sometimes, disgust—usually on the faces of children from Light pureblood wizarding families. They had been Dumbledore's allies, he knew, and they had grown up revering him. Child abuse charges were horrific things, but they were also more distant to children than to parents. Some of them would understand only that the Headmaster, a hero of their youth, was gone.

Harry shook his head as he slid into his seat next to Draco. It's like Parvati's reaction. I suppose that she's upset and thinks I kept her from seeing Connor, but really, why did she have to glare and stamp off? And why are so many people looking at me that way? Surely they have lives. Things to do that don't involve me.

The Sorting began, amid extremes of emotion greater than usual. Each House clapped frantically when a new student joined it—except Slytherin, who, Harry thought as he imitated them, seemed to have decided on decorum by silent unanimous vote even before he arrived—as if they wanted to emphasize that they still existed in the midst of war. In between the time when one House name and another was called, though, people went on staring at and buzzing about Harry.

Harry tried to ignore the sensation of ants crawling on his skin, and slapped his hand politely on the table for each new Slytherin—three new girls and two new boys, so far. He wished they were allowed to

eat before the Sorting ended. He would have had something to occupy him, and let him pretend as if those eyes didn't exist.

Especially the eyes from one particular direction. He knew McGonagall and Remus were only watching him with concern, but that made no difference to his hatred of attention.

And if Snape would look at someone else this century, Harry would be glad to be civil to him for the rest of the year.

The last first-year, Muggleborn Joshua Zinosi, went to Hufflepuff, and the applause died. Gratefully, Harry watched as Hagrid came forward and took the stool and the Sorting Hat away, and eyes turned to McGonagall as she rose to her feet.

This was her first speech as Headmistress, Harry realized with a start. Of course people would be looking to her, wondering what she would say. He wondered if she was as nervous as he would be in that situation.

Probably not, he had to think. Why the hell would she be nervous? She's been preparing for this all summer. She plans her lessons down to the minute. I'd think she'd do rather well with a speech.

But maybe not, Harry had to concede, as he caught just the faintest signs of strain on McGonagall's face. After all, she did have to follow a revered Headmaster, and she would be struggling to pull both Hogwarts and Gryffindor House out of the shame of ignominy. Harry winced at the thought of how hard it must have been for her to come to terms with knowing that a leader and friend and someone who shared her House had done all this. He wondered if there was some way he could help her.

"Students," said McGonagall then, her voice stern and loud. Harry didn't think she was using a Sonorus charm, but she calmed all traces of conversation in the Great Hall anyway. What Dumbledore did with reputation and majesty and perhaps just the slightest hint of compulsion, the Headmistress did with sheer unflinching reluctance to back down. Harry saw her eyes get fiercer and fiercer as they studied each House table. "Welcome back to another year at

Hogwarts. As most of you know, I am now Headmistress of the school, following the disgrace and imprisonment of Albus Dumbledore.”

There was some mumbling at that. Of course there would be. Harry caught a glimpse of movement at the Hufflepuff table, and glanced over to see Hannah Abbott and a few of the other Muggleborn students debating intensely with the pureblood Ernie Macmillan. Zacharias Smith was listening to them, looking bored. As if feeling Harry’s eyes, he looked up and nodded once. Harry nodded back. However pompous his means of expressing it, Zacharias’s offer of alliance was not one to be turned down. Harry had written back taking him up on it, and they’d exchanged a few other stiff letters over the summer.

“I promise,” said McGonagall, “that Hogwarts will never again become a place where anyone tolerates child abuse, or the consequences of it.”

A few people gasped. Harry himself started back on the bench, and felt Draco put a comforting hand on his shoulder and squeeze. Millicent, who sat on his other side, whispered, “Didn’t know she was going to do that, either, Harry, but it’ll be all right. We won’t let you down.”

Harry nodded his thanks, and kept his gaze fixed on McGonagall.

“I will pull Gryffindor House out of its shame,” said McGonagall. “I will pull the school and all the Houses out of the muck and mire they have been splashing themselves in, and insure that we are ready to meet this war. From now on, rather than having them with only one other House, your classes will be mixed, including students from all four, though there will be still be two groups for each year.” She completely ignored the rising tide of outright suspicion and panic at that. “As well, since I am now Headmistress, I will be fulfilling my duties as Transfiguration teacher with the help of several of my NEWT students. And Remus Lupin, a Gryffindor himself, has returned to take my place as Head of Gryffindor House, so that I do not neglect any of my responsibilities.”

Remus rose to his feet with a small smile and nod to most of the students. Harry saw gaping mouths and stares from most of them in return. He winced, and wondered how many letters the Ministry or the newspapers or their parents would receive in the next week.

Well, it's as it must be. The Headmistress did say that she was ready to face this, or she would never have hired Remus to come here in the first place. And since she's not providing him with money, they can't legally complain.

"We have a new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor as well," McGonagall was saying, as Remus sat back down. "Her name is Acies Merryweather, and she should be—"

A loud song burst from the door of the Great Hall at that moment. Harry turned his eyes in that direction, and found himself staring. Acies was standing there, but she looked as different as possible from the cloaked figure he had briefly met in McGonagall's office, whose hair and eyes, if one looked closely enough, proclaimed her resemblance to Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestranger.

She wore no cloak at all, and flowing light green robes that were only an inch or two from a gown. Her hair was still black, but her eyes large and a blue so clear that Harry could see them from here, the color of lightning. She had a white bird of some kind on her hand. Harry thought it looked like a dove, but no dove sang that loudly, or that sweetly.

Acies lifted her hand, and let the dove soar towards the ceiling. Then she walked up the middle of the Great Hall towards the head table, as if she were unconscious of all the stares on her. Harry wondered how she could do that, and if she would manage to teach him to do it.

"Thank you, Headmistress," she said, when she reached the head table and could sink into a graceful curtsy, with her robes puddling around her. "That is quite a welcome, and more than I should think I would have, coming back to Hogwarts." Her voice had the same loud sweetness as the dove's cry. Without looking anyone in the eye for long, without saying it, Harry thought, she was proclaiming that she was a Light witch with every move she made.

He shook his head in amusement. If anything, parents would be writing to express their approval of McGonagall making sure she had hired a pureblood woman from a good family right after they'd had a traitor, a fool, a werewolf, and two Death Eaters in the position.

"You are quite welcome, Professor Merryweather." McGonagall herself appeared caught between pleasure in the deceit and disgust that it was necessary. "Please sit down, and then the Feast can begin."

There was a loud cheer from several of the students at that. Acies rose and took her seat. Harry rolled his eyes when he noticed that some of the students continued staring at her and dug into the food that appeared in front of him. Really, they would get to see her most of the weeks between now and June. What was the point of looking at her when there was something to eat?

"Guess what, Potter." Millicent elbowed him in the ribs, making him grunt.

"What?" Harry took a moment to recover his breath. Millicent, he was annoyed to see, was still taller than he was, and having her elbow him was no small matter.

"I've been made Prefect." Millicent showed off the badge clinging to her robe with undeniable smugness.

"So have I," said Blaise Zabini, leaning around her to show off his own. "And I notice that among the three boys left in our year, Professor Snape chose neither his ward nor his ward's boyfriend." He clucked his tongue. "I suppose that just proves that Professor Snape can recognize talent when he sees it."

"Careful, Blaise," said Harry, turning back to his plate. "You're going to stink like Snape's shit if you go on kissing his arse like that."

Millicent let out a shocked laugh, half-gasp and half-snicker. Blaise turned the color of tomatoes, but couldn't seem to get his breath back for a moment, and then couldn't think of a reply when he did. Harry

raised his eyebrows in response to the older students smirking at him, and went on eating.

Draco's hand on his shoulder made him look to the side. Draco leaned close enough that someone else would probably think that he was kissing Harry. Harry tensed, then let himself remember it was all right if other people thought that.

"You would never make a crack like that about Snape ordinarily," Draco whispered. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine where he's concerned," said Harry. "The Headmistress said that I had to be, so I am. I've put my emotions in the Occlumency pools. Doesn't mean I can't crack a joke when Blaise's being obnoxious, does it?"

Draco winced. "Harry," he said. "My empathy is declining, but I felt as if I were standing in the middle of a snowstorm when you said that. If that's putting your anger into the Occlumency pools, I'd hate to see what it was like before you did that."

Shit, he's right. Harry concentrated as hard as he could, stamping down on his emotions and drowning them in quicksilver. It didn't quite work. There was still the anger, and the confusion over the fact that Snape wasn't glaring at him. If he would just show anger and hurt in return, this would be so much easier.

And there was the growing, nagging consciousness that he wanted to forgive Snape, or at least have a private shouting session with his guardian, in which he made Snape understand, from beginning to end, exactly why Harry was so furious and why nothing like that would ever, ever happen again.

But that was impossible. Harry was aware of what he would admit, if he went through that shouting session and that forgiveness. He would be saying, at some level, that what Snape had done was the right thing to do, and that he accepted Snape's authority over him as a guardian.

And, well, it hadn't been right, and he didn't accept that Snape had any authority over him. Not now. Not ever again. He would keep the promises he made to adults, he would listen to their suggestions when they were good ones, and he would ask them for help.

But, he had decided after long consideration in the last days of the summer, he would not take any adult as a parent. It only resulted in bad things happening. He had no idea how to be a son. They either tried to control him when they thought of themselves as parents, or thought they had to look out for him by hurting other people. And until he figured out how to manage a new relationship with Snape that would tell the man in no uncertain terms that Harry wouldn't accept his authority as guardian back, then he would have to maintain the coldly polite, calm, rational manner that the Headmistress had asked as his least effort.

Like that, he got through dinner, and was just standing up to leave when Zacharias Smith came up to the Slytherin table and nodded at him. Harry had been vaguely aware that he'd gone to the Gryffindor table and talked with Hermione, who now stood beside Zacharias. She looked half-exasperated, half-fond. Harry imagined that he often wore the same expression when he was with Draco, such as when he and Narcissa arrived back from Hogwarts the other day to find Draco trapped and sheepish in his rune circle.

"Harry," said Zacharias.

"Zacharias," said Harry back, feeling a bit stupid, and hating that eyes were focused on him once more. Look, stare when I get on a broom and fly at dragons if you like, but this is just two friends talking. Odd as it might seem to you, I am not extraordinary all the fucking time. Go away. Stop looking at me.

"I wanted to ask you if you would train us in serious dueling this year," said Zacharias. "The history has been useful, particularly for Hermione here—"

"Who managed to stump you with a list of pureblood rituals that you didn't know?" Hermione said, not quite low enough to escape Harry's

notice. Several of the Slytherins chuckled. Zacharias flushed, but continued on after just a small pause.

“And the other small spells served their purpose, too. But I’m talking about major dueling.” He leaned forward and held Harry’s eyes. “Offensive spells. The kind that Voldemort—“

This time, Hermione did look at him in admiration, and the attention of the Slytherins had become as intense as focused sunlight. Harry lifted his head and continued listening.

“—and his Death Eaters use,” Zacharias went on. He seemed to swell and gain under the attention, rather than look ridiculous from or despise it. “This is war, after all. I want to live through it.”

Harry felt some of the attention turn and reorient on him in a new way. Though he had never spoken openly with anyone but his yearmates about it, Harry knew that some of the people he shared a House with had Death Eater ties. The same thing would be true in other Houses, but a deeper secret. Crabbe and Goyle were gone, and their absences were as clear as an open wound. Others would follow, and the majority would come from Slytherin. Some of them were almost challenging him to make an open declaration of his allegiance now.

The only puzzle to Harry was why they might think that he feared to declare his allegiance.

“So do I,” he said quietly. “And I would welcome people I could trust fighting at my back, though I hope the War ends and the bastard dies before it comes to that. Of course, Zacharias. Now that I know these lessons are something people want, I’ll both continue and step them up.”

Zacharias inclined his head. The motion was grave, and in some ways extremely condescending, but Harry could see the grandeur in it, the kind of emotion that would have made Light pureblood wizards look imposing when they performed it.

“Good, Harry,” he said. “Or should I say Mr. Potter, my ally?” He lifted his eyebrows and looked around the Great Hall, raising his voice as

he said that part, and Harry had no doubt that the announcement of their alliance was one of the reasons he had asked Harry about their little dueling club in public.

That brought more focused attention than ever, but Harry just shook his head and turned for the dungeons. There was at least one more confrontation waiting for him there, one person who had been conspicuously absent from dinner.

Someone bumped into him as he was leaving the Hall. Harry felt Draco's shoulder catch him, and he nodded his thanks before he turned and confronted the person who had jostled him.

"Watch where you're going, Potter," Montague said, curling his lip at Harry. His face was hard, and he certainly seemed to be paying more attention to Harry than he ever had. "We wouldn't want you to trip and break your little neck."

Harry narrowed his eyes. Montague's antagonism had at least a few probable causes. Of course, he could be getting ready to become a Death Eater himself, but he had also shown some interest, last year, in a person Harry had deeply hurt.

He chose the obvious route first. "Want to show me your left arm, Montague?" he asked, pitching his voice low enough not to carry.

Montague jerked as if stung, and then leaned nearer, every sense obviously on high alert. "You just keep telling yourself that you'll survive this war, Potter," he breathed, and hurried off.

Harry calmly watched him go. Nothing had been proven, after all, and it would be stupid of Voldemort to mark students still in Hogwarts as Death Eaters, especially Quidditch players, who would spend time changing into and out of their clothing in front of other people. He put Montague into the Unknown, possibly a threat category in his mind, and walked in the direction of the dungeons.

Draco walked at his side. He kept shaking his head. Harry finally glanced at him. "What?"

"I don't know how you can just shrug that off," Draco muttered. "He practically threatened you, and you threatened him back."

Only then did Harry realize that, for all his joking tone, Draco's lips were pale, and his teeth caused a faint but audible grinding when he pushed them together. Harry reached out to gently grip his hand. That would get more stares. He didn't care. Reassuring Draco was more important.

"Draco," he said quietly. "I've trained all my life to survive situations exactly like this. Evaluating people who might be either threats or allies is as easy as breathing, and so is retorting when they issue vague threats against my life." He sighed when Draco just looked at him in silent misery. "This is going to be harder for you than it is for me, isn't it?" he added, letting his hand brush Draco's cheek.

Draco turned his head into the touch, and then uttered a little desperate mutter. Harry could make it out when he strained his ears. "I hate seeing you in danger."

"I know," said Harry, and waited until Draco stepped in front of him to begin walking to the dungeons again. Then he put a hand on the small of his back, ignoring Draco's half-startled, half-indignant look, and ushered him along. "Don't worry, I'll protect you."

Draco obviously did not know which expression he ought to wear in response to that. Harry hummed in pleasure to himself, and thought he was doing quite well at fulfilling Madam Shiverwood's prescriptions, even though he hadn't written down that he liked reassuring Draco on the list she'd forced him to make. "Potter."

Harry sighed as he put down the book he'd just been pretending to read. Draco had gone upstairs already, to give him some privacy when this confrontation came. Of course he didn't deserve any more familiarity than she was going to give him with the cold pronunciation of his surname, but he'd been hoping for it anyway. "Parkinson," he said, meeting her on equal ground.

Pansy folded her arms and stared at him. She was wearing robes that enveloped her more completely than the usual school ones, leaving only her face and hands visible. Eventually, Harry knew, she would go about so that her face was entirely hidden, and only show it to her spouse and children. She wouldn't speak, either, save as such quick motions of her hands might speak, except on Halloween and Walpurgis Night.

She'd gone further down the road towards becoming a necromancer than Harry had thought she would, if she was wearing these robes now. Looking at her set, pale face, Harry thought she might just make it.

"I am choosing you to be one of my Speakers," said Pansy abruptly. "That means that you'll be one of the people who talks to those outside Slytherin House for me, the person who gives excuses to professors if I'm sick or studying, one of those I can choose to pass along messages once I stop speaking to most people and I absolutely need them to know something."

Harry caught his breath. He'd read about Speakers, but he would never have thought that Pansy would choose him to be one, not when he'd killed her father in the first place.

"I don't deserve this honor," he said quietly.

"No, you don't." Pansy folded her arms more tightly. "But each young necromancer chooses three Speakers, Potter—one whom she absolutely trusts, one whom she can vaguely trust, and one whom she hates. That allows her three degrees of distance from the world, to represent the distance she'll eventually have from almost everybody. Millicent and Montague are the others."

So, Montague might have been upset with me for hurting Pansy after all. Harry added that to his mental impression of the other boy, and nodded.

"All right then," he said. He had to do all he could to make things up to her and to support her in this path that was her own free choice, and Merlin knew, this was little enough.

“Because you’re a Speaker, I can talk to you honestly,” said Pansy, without seeming to notice his acceptance. “I want you to know that I hate you, Potter. The more I study, the more I see what D—Dragonsbane gave up, and the more I see what he attained. You took that all away in a single stroke. And yes, my mother’s talked to me and told me not to hate you, that I don’t understand. I don’t care. I don’t care if she’s allies with you. She can be allies with you all she wants. But you’ll never be anything to me now but the person who took my father away. Do you understand?”

Harry winced, but nodded. He was glad that Pansy could feel honest anger towards him, that her vacillating emotions had hardened over the summer into this rage and determination. It was better, healthier for her, than the sort of regret that he had felt when Sirius died, as if he hadn’t said enough to make clear his emotions while his godfather was alive. If he couldn’t do anything else for her, couldn’t open freedom to her in any other way, then Harry would be her Speaker and help her along the path that would let her become what she wished to be.

“I want to hear you say it,” said Pansy.

“I understand.”

Pansy tossed her hair inside her cowl, and then turned away from him. Harry sighed and sat back down on the couch. He’d lost his appetite for even the pretense of reading.

He didn’t know how long he’d sat there before an owl fluttered through the door of the common room, just opening at that moment to let some of the students out, and up to him. Harry eyed her in confusion as he accepted the letter. He didn’t know the owl, though of course that didn’t mean anything.

The letter was brief, but the handwriting told him at once who it was from.

My dear, dear Potter:

I hope that you do not find yourself too devastated with not hearing from me. Until now, however, I have had no news of great importance to send you, and one should always refrain from wearying owls when one has nothing to say. Then they bite one, and one must strike them dead with an Avada Kedavra, and that is a waste of a perfectly good owl.

You should know that my late unlamented colleague Mulciber did manage to cause some minor trouble last year, in between casting increasingly ineffective Imperius Curses at you. He gained access to the parchment book that contains the names of magical children destined for Hogwarts, by the simple expedient of asking to see it (I believe he had some tale of lessening the prejudice of purebloods against Muggleborns, but not wanting to ask the students outright if they were likely to hold those prejudices). He copied down some of the names of those not yet at the school, and passed them on to my Lord.

Some of my—call them friends—now insinuate that my Lord is attacking Muggleborn children younger than eleven, and draining them of their magic in order to strengthen himself. He used to not do such a thing, because eating one person's magic weakened him for days afterward. Since his return from the cauldron, however, he has been able to do this with much greater ease, which may be attributed to the bit of flesh and blood that he took from you. Good show, Potter, really, increasing that particular ability of his.

Why did I not tell you this before now? Because I did not feel like it. Now I do. Also, I have been a little too good to you, I think, and now deserve to watch you suffer and squirm.

Your dear, dear self-interested friend, who now needs to Apparate as his older friends are closing in,

Evan Rosier.

Harry crumpled the letter in his fist, and closed his eyes. He forced himself to do nothing but breathe for moments, and shove away as much of the guilt as he could. He had seen nothing in his visions that had let him guess Voldemort was doing this.

You've not exactly gone seeking the visions either, though. You wanted a quiet night's sleep more than you wanted the information.

Harry bowed his head. In fact, his major emotion, despite what he had done to make this possible for Voldemort, was not guilt, but a tight, tearless rage.

He had some interesting ideas now that he hadn't had at the beginning of the summer. They coalesced and slammed into him, growing in power and fury like a storm.

If there is ever going to be a time to turn that dream link into a weapon, that time is now.

Harry decided it was time to go to bed.

And hope like hell he dreamed.

Chapter Nineteen: On the Wings of War

Harry had never realized how hard it was to fall asleep deliberately. Of course, he couldn't remember ever being this desperate to do it before, even when he wanted Christmas or their birthday to come as a child so that he could see Connor open his presents. He lay with his hand clenched behind his head and waited for several minutes, not moving any of his muscles and breathing with perfect calm, and still nothing happened.

Well, when have I had the visions before?

That didn't answer the problem, though, because Harry knew full well he had tended to have the dreams at different times—when he was stressed, when he was relaxed, when he had expected nothing more than a night of ordinary sleep. He couldn't will or create a condition that would allow him to go to sleep and have a vision.

So reach through the scar link. It was what you planned to do when you were in Voldemort's head, anyway. Just do it now. Try to open it while you lie here.

Harry reached carefully through the shades and shadows of his own mind towards what he thought was the scar link, a piece of Occlumency-shaded pain that he didn't like to think about, and usually didn't until it exploded. Almost at once, he felt the warm, pulsing bond that Fawkes shared with him become active, and the phoenix appeared above his bed in a burst of light that brought complaints from Blaise and a sleepy half-mumble from Draco. Fawkes settled on his shoulder, the one where Argutus hadn't coiled, and warbled at him. In Harry's mind formed the distinct vision of not trying to go off and do anything by himself.

Even Regulus, whose connection with him grew fainter and fainter as more of McGonagall's work called him back to his body, was awake now, calling his name. Harry! Harry, what are you doing?

Harry grimly reached out and touched the scar link again. He could control it, he could bring it to life, he thought. He had simply never tried before, because he had never had the nerve.

Now he did. He should have had it some time since, because he was depending on it so much to help win this war, but he would forget about the guilt. He reached for it, and had a brief, flickering sensation of falling down a tunnel.

The warmth of his bond with Fawkes faded from his mind, and then the sound of the voice calling his name. Harry gathered his feet—they were paws, of course, which reassured him he had got some part of this right—and looked around, expecting to see Voldemort's bedroom, or maybe a pair of staring basilisk eyes or a gathering of Death Eaters.

Instead, he found himself in a very familiar stone corridor. Harry's whiskers twitched in surprise, and he gave a little hop forward; his missing left forepaw made him grateful that he wasn't missing a foot in his own body. This was Voldemort's mind, the tunnel that led to his imagined Chamber of Secrets. But why was he here? Had he not touched the right part of the link that bound them after all?

He considered, and dismissed, the idea that Voldemort would have allowed him to come this far only to trap him. This part of the corridor was too near the seat of the man's memory, which Harry had badly damaged before, sending him into a retreat and a coma for several days.

Harry wondered if lynxes could grin devilishly. If they could, then he would be doing so now. He didn't quite know how he had come here, but as long as he was here, then he could hurt Voldemort. He began working his way forward, past the mass of bones that announced the entrance to the Chamber.

A disturbance in the mind, shifting in the pool, and he lost track of what Bella was saying about their allies. He leaned back his head and closed his eyes, and he located the stirring at once, because was he not a master Legilimens? It would have been beneath him to take longer than a moment, and no one would ever say that Voldemort, the proper Dark Lord of Britain, had taken longer than a moment.

The presence was within his mind, close to the seat of his memories, and moving forwards with definite hostile intent.

Potter. There was no question in him, even before he saw the cat-form that Evan had told him had watched their plans several times. No other would have been so impudent as to bring pain and destruction here. Potter did not know what was right, or what was beautiful, and that included the sanctity of a Dark Lord's mind.

Of course, he had Potter on his own ground, and he, Lord Voldemort, was aware of him. That meant he could crush him to death in his mind, tightening the walls of the tunnel around him, and Potter would perish. It would take only a moment.

But that was not the way one of his enemies ought to die. It was not right, and it was not beautiful. He, Lord Voldemort, could feel himself smiling. He would show Potter how a true Lord treated his most persistent foes.

He reached, gently, down the tunnel that bound them both together, and then slipped inside Potter's mind, even as Potter padded through his.

Harry paused and flicked his ears. He'd had the impression that something had just brushed against his head and stung him lightly, like a biting fly, but he knew that nothing lived in this part of Voldemort's head, so he decided he might have imagined it. Or perhaps the sensations that lingered in another mind, when he had time to notice them and wasn't engaged in a frantic search for some way of crippling that mind's possessor, were different from those in the physical world. After all, he imagined most of the things he felt here, and his thoughts were prone to go in many strange directions.

He rounded the final corner before the doors to the Chamber, and then flattened himself to the ground and snarled. Before him, overwhelming the corridor, were the black-purple, overlapping coils of an immense snake. Voldemort had obviously imagined this guardian since the last time and put it here to protect his memory. Merlin knew what it was in reality—some sophisticated Occlumency technique, probably.

Harry shot his claws. He thought he could take the snake, with as much mental flexibility as he himself had, but he would prefer not to fight. He could make out no head, which made him think it was buried somewhere in those coils, and the snake might be asleep. If that was the case, then he could creep by with his back against the wall, and perhaps the giant creature would never notice him.

There was a slight corridor of clear stone and air to the left. Harry walked towards it, his claws retracting, grateful, and not for the first time, that his form here was feline. He could never have managed so soft a walk as he did on these padded paws, and the lynx body was much lighter than this own.

All seemed to be going well until he tried to take a step forward and found himself unable to move. He glanced over his shoulder, wondering what had trapped him.

He found a coil he hadn't even felt draped over his back, twitching slightly. It had the look of one near the tail, and, in fact, one end of it did first taper and then swell, into a purple bulb that Harry thought was a rattle.

It began to shake as he watched, and then the body in front of him moved gently and lazily, the head lifting out of the middle. Harry flattened himself, and let the magic he possessed here swell around him. He was healthy now, able to use his own power, which hadn't been the case the last time he was in Voldemort's mind. Besides, if the snake could touch him, then he could touch the snake, so he wouldn't be reduced to the frustrated impotency of vision.

The snake's head was a beautiful thing, moving slowly from side to side, much like the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. Harry saw no hint of a killing yellow gaze when it met his eyes, though, only one as deep a green as the forest of his own mind had once been. He hissed and prepared to spring.

The snake opened its mouth first, and loosed a cloudy spray of poison that darkened the tunnel and fell in a stinging spray upon Harry.

Pain like acid dug into his sides and shoulders, and Harry screamed. He felt his impudent enemy scream, and smiled in satisfaction. Then he was fully within his adversary's mind. He expected to see the hedge-maze he had taken such great delight in defiling last time. And he remembered the darting boy who had been the center and heart of Potter's sanity. This time, he would make sure to torture that boy, and let Potter watch it.

But there was no hedge-maze. There was no green and rustling depth that watched the Lord Voldemort suspiciously and tried to overwhelm him with stubborn, fragile life. Instead, Lord Voldemort found himself standing on one great metallic branch, one of many projecting from a slender tree of steel, which spread in all directions around him and rose up and out of sight.

Scan, turn his head, look carefully, tilt his head. Still the impression around him did not change. If it was an illusion that Potter had fabricated to conceal the reality of his mind—but no, any illusion would have shattered by now before the gaze of the great and mighty Lord Voldemort. This was the reality of his mind.

The metallic tree did bear living leaves, green shoots embedded in the steel, but not all of them were done growing. And around the Lord Voldemort was not emptiness, but darkness, constellations of memories and emotions and truths, with spaces that Potter had left blank to fill later. It looked for all the world like he had ripped down and rebuilt his mind, but that was not true, could not be true, because Legilimency could not be employed that way, and no wizard would attack his own thoughts.

He could only think that somehow, Potter had hit on an illusion that defied him, one that only seemed the more and more solid the more he looked, and his body was cold with rage and the rage was magnificent.

He heard a rustling sound above him, and glanced up. There was a small shape swinging on the branch above him. Lord Voldemort had no doubt that that was Potter's sanity. He would not have woven the

illusion that well, then, and the boy was, on some level, no doubt, still running through a hedge-maze.

The Lord Voldemort aimed his wand.

And then Potter was in his mind with him, and things briefly became confused and then very chaotic.

Harry writhed, the pain of the venom worse than any he had experienced—

Well, no, that was not quite true. Whenever he was tempted to make extravagant comparisons, he remembered the pain of his left hand being cut off, and then he usually dropped them.

Still, he knew he couldn't stay here. He had to flee. The poison would kill him if he remained. It was frustrating to be forced to flee when he knew that Voldemort's most vulnerable memories were only a few spaces of thought away, but he could not reach them, and he would not die for this.

He jumped back to his own mind.

He became aware of the intruder at once. Voldemort had made no effort to disguise his presence, in the way that Harry had. He was caught out in the open, and he was taking aim at something, probably Harry's sanity or memories. Harry took in that much at a glance.

Then Voldemort became aware of him, and their perceptions twisted and bounded as they regarded each other. They had never been in such close contact before. When they first journeyed into each other's minds, they had left barely any awareness in their own thoughts, and Harry had always seen himself in the physical world when he was close to Voldemort in the visions.

Harry recovered first. And since he was on his home ground, his imaginings of what could happen here, his conceptions of possibility, were the stronger. He was used to his own mind. He knew what he usually thought about. He imagined Voldemort trapped, pinned, crushed and held down, unable to escape and get out of sight.

Voldemort, of course, slithered free of the trap, though not without a hiss of pain. He was concentrating on hiding himself now, but what Dumbledore had once told Harry held true: he was not as good an Occlumens as he was a Legilimens. Harry used that against him, turning the whole of his mind into transparent representations of the metallic tree and the silver pools that hovered around it, easily showing him the writhing wisp of Voldemort's alien intrusion.

From the Dark Lord came compulsion, like a blowing wind, trying to grab and control Harry.

And the whole of Harry's mind rose in revolt against that.

He heard himself snarl, and honestly wasn't sure if it had only happened in his head, or if he had done it physically. This time, he imagined arrows going after Voldemort, spike after spike of pain and hatred, pinning him and striking him and filling him with the same kind of agony that the snake's poison had given Harry. Gone were the thoughts of holding him prisoner or trying to figure out how the link between them worked. Harry only wanted him out of his head, now. Compulsion, a binding on his will, was not to be tolerated.

He heard, more distinctly this time, the hiss of pain, and then Voldemort said in that high cold voice Harry thought of as the embodiment of nightmare, "You have not killed me. I cannot be killed."

Harry didn't bother to answer. The warmth of his bond with Fawkes was rising around him now, and then the phoenix was there, flapping his wings strongly in Harry's head, the sunlight showering down. Voldemort could perhaps have stayed and fought, but he obviously saw no reason to challenge the fire of a phoenix. In moments, he was gone, slipped free from Harry's mind and back down the link to his own body.

The madness of his revulsion faded a moment later, and Harry lay panting, taking stock of his pain. He knew that some of his control over his emotions had been abraded; that was probably the practical effect of the snake's venom. He knew that his head felt

simultaneously as if it were splitting and as if it were on fire—his scar again. But nothing else was hurt.

He rose slowly out of the dream, to find Fawkes sitting on his chest, Argutus curled up near his face, and Draco shaking him frantically. Regulus's voice lurched in and out of hearing, as if he were on a distant ship and calling to Harry through the wind and the waves. – hear me? Harry? Can you—damn it, don't do this—

I'm all right, Harry thought at him, and then ran his hand through the blood that slid down his cheek, grimacing. He hadn't had a vision that made his scar open like this for a while. He sighed and sat up slowly, rubbing at his face and trying to decide whether he should attempt medical magic on his head or not.

Draco didn't give him the chance to, since his worry had already gone straight into anger. "That was another stupid mistake, Harry," he said. "Wasn't it? I could feel what you were doing, although not see it clearly. It was like I was along for a ride in a dream."

Harry stared at him. Damn. Is this a side effect of his having possession? Or perhaps just a side effect of him practicing his possession in my head and only my head so far?

"I felt the pain," said Draco evenly, and then touched the side of his head. For the first time, Harry became aware that there was blood staining the white-blond hair, as if Draco had a lightning bolt scar of his own in a different place. "Good work, that," Draco said, and the drawl in his voice wasn't one Harry had heard in a long time. "You'll find ways to punish the people who love you even lying flat on your back in a bed, Harry. I can't wait for the day when you'll manage to make me bleed while you're brushing your teeth in the morning. That's something to look forward to."

"I didn't know that was going to happen!" The words broke forth from Harry, sparking from between his lips, before he could stop them. He immediately ducked his head and turned away, breathing harshly. He tried to slide the emotions into the Occlumency pools, but they weren't accepting them. He supposed that was of a piece with his

degraded emotional control. He knew, he knew, he should be quiet, but it was hard when Draco went on.

"No, you didn't. But you knew it was a stupid idea to go hunting for Voldemort with your mind, and you did it anyway, without even warning me that it was a possibility. Why, Harry? Normally, you're not stupid." Draco paused. "Well, not as stupid as this, anyway," he corrected himself, with a small sigh.

"Will you shut up?" Blaise asked from the other side of the room. "We have Potions first thing tomorrow, and some of us can't count on the favor of the professor to make it through the class without doing anything."

Harry really, really didn't need the reminder that he would have to face Snape with his shields down in just a few hours. He put his head between his knees, and forced himself to concentrate on nothing more than the breath sliding in and out of his lungs. Fawkes, who'd fluttered up to sit on the pillow, let out a long, moaning note, and Argus flickered his tongue out to catch one of the tears on Harry's cheeks.

"You cry from pain," he noted. "You cry from anger. You cry from fear. I wonder if there is any emotion that you do not express by crying? What is it? I would like to know. The tears taste good. Do they always?"

"They always taste the same, I think," Harry whispered back in Parseltongue. "And no, I don't think there's any emotion that I don't cry from."

The intense pain in his head was finally beginning to recede, though his scar still felt like a fresh brand. Harry gathered himself with a small shake. He had deserved what Draco said, and he knew it. And he absolutely had to get his control back, or Merlin knew what would happen when he faced Snape.

Well, no, it didn't have to be just Merlin who would know. Harry knew. And it would be a scene of shouting, and quite correct accusations of childishness, and then Snape would go on thinking that he needed a

guardian after all, even if Harry didn't end up forgiving him before the class was done. A scene like this would not do wonders for Harry's independent appearance and sense of good judgment.

His emotions shifted and wavered again, and the next one that surfaced struck Harry dumb with astonishment, though a moment before he'd been ready to apologize to Draco. He watched, from the distance that Snape had taught him with regard to his own mind, as it rushed through him and made him shake.

Need. Longing. Loneliness. He really just wanted to lean against someone for right now and let them take care of everything, wanted to go to sleep with no worries and rise up in the knowledge that that other person had helped arrange everything so that they would handle it, together.

Of all the emotions he could feel at the moment, this was the most dangerous, Harry knew, the one that could most easily lead to him reaching for that help. He was furious with himself for feeling it.

But no, no, he couldn't be furious, because that would just result in yelling at Draco, who didn't deserve it, and it was another opportunity for his mind to feed on wild and raw feeling. Harry had known how to master that feeling since long before he learned Occlumency. His training was no longer as instinctive as it had once been, but he remembered it.

He focused his entire attention on something else, let the smallness of his own need drown in the intensity and interest of that focus, and felt the tension ebb out of his body. He lifted his head and smiled at Draco, who just stared back at him, apparently thrown off stride by Harry's reaction.

"You were right," Harry whispered. "That was stupid of me. I won't do it again. I'm sorry." He sighed. "I endangered my own life, or at least my own sanity, and accomplished nothing. And now that I know some of the dangers of the possession gift, it would be completely irresponsible of me to do it again, since I would willingly pull you along with me." He took up Draco's hand and squeezed. "I'm sorry," he repeated.

Draco tore free. "You know that I'm still angry with you," he said.

Harry nodded. "I know."

"You know that I still think you could do that again, and that I won't really trust you not to repeat it for a while."

"I know."

Draco just frowned a little more, and then turned and walked back to his bed. "Clean the blood off your face, for Merlin's sake," he added, over his shoulder. "Unless you want to go down to breakfast like that in the morning and scare the first-years. And you're already doing a good enough job of frightening people."

Harry stayed still for a long moment, listening to Draco's sheets rustle as he climbed back into them, and hearing Fawkes croon, so distressed that only tattered visions from the sound appeared in Harry's head. When he was sure that he was calm, he climbed out of bed and went into the loo.

The sight of his own face in the mirror made him shake his head—blood-streaked, pale, grave. He'd failed, and yes, that had been a stupid idea. Since he hadn't accomplished anything, he could agree with Draco in that much. Insane risks should pay off.

But he took heart in the determination shining behind the defeat. At least he hadn't lost much, either. Even the pain from his scar was fading now. The worst that could happen was that Voldemort would try to exploit the link between them again, and this time Harry would be ready. More likely, he thought, the Dark Lord would leave it open, trying to lure Harry into entering his mind and a trap once more.

"I'll help Draco train his possession gift," he whispered to the reflection as he washed the blood off. "Who knows what he might be able to achieve, riding beside me in my dreams that way? Maybe even possessing Voldemort. And it'll show that I do trust him."

He went back to bed with twin goals: keeping a close watch on Draco tomorrow, so that he could know how he might make this mistake up to him, and keeping a close watch on himself. Harry did fear Draco's disappointment and anger, but more than that, he feared that that drowning need for companionship and protection would surface again.

It was his own nature that might make him forgive Snape before he was ready. Harry was master of himself, though, not the other way around, and no childish emotions were going to make him do what they wanted. He could so be a rational human being, an adult who could treat with other adults on equal footing and needed no one to guard him or injure others in the guarding of him. They would see.

"The first day is always a challenge, as I see how much you have forgotten over the summer." Snape was stalking in a circle around the classroom, his eyes lingering over the newly mixed group in the dungeon. Draco and Harry were still together, a fact that Harry found himself deeply grateful for, but Connor and Hermione were missing Ron, and in the back of the room sat Blaise, Padma Patil, a few other Ravenclaw girls whom Harry didn't know, Zacharias, Hannah, and Justin. "You will pull out your books and brew the potion on page 183." He had a slight smirk curling the corners of his mouth. Once, Harry would have found that intriguing, as he wondered what about the potion on page 183 was so awful that most people would have trouble brewing it.

Now, he felt only a faint stir of interest. Snape was outside him, no more important to him than any other professor. Granted, he was Harry's Head of House, but Harry refused to think that he had to find him interesting for that reason. Harry intended to go to Remus if he really felt that he needed to talk to an adult, and of course there was always the Headmistress, if it was just something as simple as preventing reporters from getting onto Hogwarts grounds.

He checked page 183 of the Potions book; he and Draco had partnered up, of course, leaving poor Blaise to pair with Padma. He saw the problem almost at once—or well, what would be a problem for most of the students in the class except him, Draco, and Hermione. The potion, which depended on numerical mysticism and was supposed to make it easier to calculate equations in one's head,

required twice as much stirring as normal, and it went in alternating directions, once clockwise, once counter, twice clockwise, twice counter, and so on. One mistake in the count would mess up the whole potion.

“Do you want me to go get the ingredients?” Harry asked Draco. He could feel Snape looking at him, and then away. Now he was prowling the back of the classroom, pausing to check Justin’s cauldron and, from the sound of it, make a few sarcastic remarks.

“I don’t think so,” said Draco.

Harry blinked. “Why not?” Draco had an odd note in his voice, and he rose and leaned towards Harry as if he had some great confidence to impart. Harry watched him with a wrinkled brow. He’d apologized during breakfast, where other people could hear him, and endured much good-natured teasing from the others about what he might have to apologize to Draco for. He’d made it abundantly clear, on the private moments during the walk to Potions class, that he wasn’t about to do anything like that again. He’d already sent Hedwig with a note to McGonagall, explaining the trick that Mulciber had pulled last year and that he’d tried to do something about crippling Voldemort, but been unable to.

“Because I don’t think having you that close to Snape would be a good idea right now,” said Draco simply.

Harry blinked, smiled, and relaxed. So it wasn’t that Draco thought him in the wrong after all. He was merely trying to protect Harry. “He’s going to come over and want to see our potion eventually, you know,” he said.

“I know. But I think we can wait for him to come to us.” Draco’s hand squeezed his shoulder, and then he slipped off to the storage area to get their ingredients. Harry started preparing the cauldron.

He was involved in what he was doing, but he had known Snape for years now, and had had time to get used to the feel of his magic and the weight of his eyes. He knew long before Snape said anything that he was standing behind his chair, watching him.

“It seems that you’re taking a long time over the cauldron, Potter,” said Snape, a neutral observation. “Odd, for someone of your skill in this subject.”

Harry readied himself. He remembered that the worst thing he could do would be to betray excess emotion. So long as he didn’t let Snape get to him, then he would win this strange little game they were playing. He would have preferred it if Snape had just ignored him—he could have respected Snape for that—but he wanted to put Harry in emotional mazes, as he had with his odd statements about missing him in the Headmistress’s office the other day. Harry would thread the mazes and come out again.

He turned around and simply nodded at Snape, wearing the same face as he would have in Transfiguration or Herbology. “Professor Snape, sir,” he said. “I know that this particular potion can stick to the sides of the cauldron if one isn’t careful, so I wanted to cast the appropriate spells so it wouldn’t.” He held his hand over the inside surface and concentrated. The metal gleamed a moment later with the sheen of the spell settling into place. Harry thought a moment, then added one so that the ingredients wouldn’t clump, also a danger with this potion.

“Impressive, Mr. Potter,” Snape murmured. “Five points to Slytherin.”

Harry just nodded. Let any other teacher assign him points for his House, and he would accept them. Snape was just another teacher.

“I wonder,” Snape went on meditatively, “if other students will think to do that?”

Harry shrugged. “You could always tell them, sir.”

“Ah,” said Snape, his eyes focused intently on Harry. “But I prefer to use some potions as a test of more than just ordinary brewing skill. They often let me see which students of mine possess unusual intelligence or aptitude.”

There is no reason, Harry told himself, for you to be shaking inside, and so he didn't shake. He just nodded and murmured, "That's very interesting, sir."

He looked to the side as Draco approached with the three different kinds of stones they needed to crush for the potion, and smiled at him. He could feel Snape's wondering stare on the back of his neck.

This isn't that hard, Harry thought, as he began to crush the first stone in his pestle, bracing its base against the stump of his left hand. Snape makes his own rules, of course, but I can make my own, too. And I was acting like a child yesterday. So long as I keep the sarcastic comments and the emotional outbursts to myself, then some kind of bond might come back sooner, because I'll convince him that I'm not a child, and so he can't be a guardian.

Harry stepped out onto the grounds after dinner and stretched his arms over his head, yawning. It was an unexpectedly sunny day for September, and not chill, yet. Harry couldn't think of any better day to meet outside for the first formal assembly of their little dueling club. He was tired of abandoned classrooms, and this would give them a chance to discuss the meeting place and decide on a permanent one.

He walked towards the lake, more aware of the absence at his right shoulder than he wanted to be. Draco had excused himself from the dueling club on the grounds that he needed to look up a few more Arithmancy calculations for the next spell he wanted to perfect. Of course Harry hoped he had fun—and didn't get himself trapped in a rune circle this time—but he felt a bit lonely.

Stop it. You do not.

He still hadn't managed to slide his emotions all the way beneath the Occlumency pools yet, but he could concentrate on something else, and then he would stop feeling the way he did. Right now, he was concentrating on the unexpectedly large number of students gathered around the lake, some sitting, some standing, most talking quietly. They turned their heads as he came up to stand on the fringes of the group, and Harry shifted as he felt the intensity of their eyes.

There was an uninvited guest, too, as Harry found out when a loud cry interrupted his first attempt at speech. He looked up in annoyance. A white bird circled overhead, with another mocking screech, and then settled in a tree near the edge of the lake, fluffing its feathers at him. It was a gull, Harry saw, with dark shoulders and rather offensively bright eyes. It cocked its head at him and watched, then once again screamed when he opened his mouth.

Harry shrugged at it and went on. "All right. Most of you heard Zacharias Smith ask me about a dueling club, and some of you have been in the one we had last year." No more than half of the students there looked to have been regular attendees, though, Harry thought, as he met the eyes of people he knew only slightly or not at all. Cho Chang gave him a reassuring smile and a little wave from the middle of the Ravenclaw clump. After that, Harry used the trick of focusing more on those he did know to keep himself moving forward. "And you probably heard him ask me about offensive spells, too. I'll teach them to you."

He raised his eyebrows, and listened to the intense gasps that came from some of the people near the gull's tree. Was that the official seat for people who didn't think I'd dare do what Zacharias asked of me? "I'll teach them to you, if certain conditions are fulfilled," Harry emphasized. "First, if you practice them on other students outside the club and it's not a clear-cut case of defending yourself or a professor asking you to demonstrate, then you're out of the group. Permanently. Second, some of you will have to get permission from your parents to learn the Dark Arts spells—"

"You can't teach us Dark Arts," said a Ravenclaw girl Harry remembered distantly. He thought he'd had some trouble with her in second year, when she'd got upset with him for hexing one of her Housemates. Harry winced as he remembered Tom Riddle, in his head, turning the girl's hex back on her and sending her to the hospital wing. Her name was Margaret, he thought, and she had an impressive glare. "That's against the school rules."

Harry had prepared for that. All he'd had to do was ask Hermione, and she'd gone digging for the answer during lunch and given it to him at dinner. "Not technically, it isn't," he said. "Or we wouldn't have

been able to learn them in Defense Against the Dark Arts last year. What it does mean is that we have to keep it in the class, and it has to be a teacher-student situation. And the parents have to agree to let their children learn them. There's a blanket exception for Defense, always has been. But if a student is younger than sixth year, he or she has to have direct permission to learn them anywhere else."

"That can't be right." Margaret looked ready to fight it out if need be. "How could that possibly be right? That's the kind of thing Headmaster Dumbledore fought to stop, the learning of Dark Arts at Hogwarts." She paused a moment later, as though she'd just realized what she'd said, but she gave Harry a hard, challenging glare.

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Yes, he did," he said quietly. "But he permitted them again last year. The Headmistress told me that she would continue that policy for as long as the war was in motion." And she isn't happy about it. McGonagall had sent him a long, stiff note that both thanked him for his warning about the Muggleborn children and outlined exactly what she would and would not tolerate in his little dueling club. "Things are different now. We have to fight. And I'm going to assume that everyone here wants to learn to fight. If you don't, you can stay out of the Dark Arts lessons."

Margaret sat down with a huff and folded arms. Harry shook his head at her, and turned and looked at the others. "Third, we have to have someone nearby who can cast medical magic, just in case someone gets hurt." He looked over his shoulder, and smiled when he saw the figure striding across the lawn from Hogwarts. "That would be the professor who's agreed to help supervise us, Remus Lupin."

A few of the students shrank as Remus came up, but not many. Too many of them remembered him as more of a Defense professor than a werewolf. Remus smiled at them all, but saved especial smiles for Connor, who sat with Parvati's hand tightly in his at the edge of the lake, and Harry. Harry felt a small ball of tension uncurl in his stomach. He liked to have an excuse to spend time with Remus, without pretending that he needed to be cared for.

"So," Harry went on. "For tonight, I'm just going to show you standard defensive magic. And Remus agreed to duel me." He grinned at

Remus and pulled out his wand. He would be teaching people who used their wands, after all.

“Duel, indeed,” said Remus mildly, his own wand already in his grip. “I’m sure that it will be more like a demonstration in how to lose, Harry, with all the losing on your side.” His amber eyes glowed with a relaxed playfulness that Harry could easily see irradiating his wolf form, too.

“Oh, you think so, do you?” Harry asked, and then pointed his wand straight at Remus. “Tarantallegra!”

Remus had a Shield Charm up before the spell was more than half out of Harry’s mouth, using it nonverbally. Several of the students who hadn’t yet learned nonverbal magic gasped. Harry grinned as his own hex came right back at him, and held out his stump, around which he’d cast Haurio, letting everyone see and hear him doing it. The small jade-green shield ate the hex, and Harry took a moment to explain, vaguely aware of Remus circling around him, but not thinking he’d do anything while Harry was giving a vital lesson to the others.

“The difference between the Absorption Charm and the Shield Charm is how much you want to wound the people around you,” he said. “Protego bounces the spell right back at the caster. But the Absorption Charm eats them. That means that you don’t have the spell to reflect back, of course, but when you’re trying not to hurt a friend on the battlefield, it’s the better choice.”

Remus abruptly spoke from the side. “Pedita!”

Harry found himself trying to fight his limbs free of an invisible, snapping, flailing net, which was just as determined to snare and hold him. The Snare Spell did that, fiercer and nastier than any Body-Bind, and especially useful with holding a moving opponent; it would chase someone even if he moved away from the site of the spell.

Remus means it, then. The thought made gladness grow in Harry. He could use a little exercise.

He thought Finite Incantatem! At the same time, he cast, “Clangor incommodus!”

Remus promptly winced and clapped his hands over his ears. They would be buzzing and ringing, Harry knew, probably with a sound of many bells. And since Remus had a werewolf’s hearing, they would bother him even more than an ordinary wizard. It was a wonder that he managed to cast the next spell at all.

“Stupefy!”

A wonder, but not a wonderful spell, Harry thought as he rolled away from it. Then, because Remus obviously hadn’t managed to shake off the sound yet, and he wanted to show the other students how easy it was to incapacitate someone with a relatively simple spell, he chose variations of the Clangor incommodus spell, targeting Remus’s eyes and nose.

Remus gave a pained sound when the spells took effect, doubtless seeing—because Harry had wanted it for him—dozens of disagreeable little flies and smelling the reek of carrion. Harry took the time to add in another explanation around his panting.

“Even though the spells are minor, each one piles another distraction on him that he has to deal with as he tries to cast the Finite to end them. And, of course, each one needs a new spell to get rid of it—“

“Finite Incantatem!”

Remus cast so fiercely that Harry suspected he was fully recovered. He started moving at once, hoping a few of the students would take lessons from the way he kept his head up and his feet never in the same place for long, but so occupied and so happy that he didn’t much care if they paid attention or not. He could always explain things again later. This was a good beginning for their club, anyway. Nothing like a practical demonstration.

Remus narrowed his eyes, and Harry knew his next spell would be nonverbal. He began whispering Protego over and over under his breath, concentrating the Shield Charms around the silver bracelet

with the Malfoy and Black family mottos united that he wore on his right arm.

Remus's spell came flying at him, a dark green ray that signaled a combination Harry had heard of Aurors using. It would both knock him unconscious and tie him up with ropes that no blade could cut.

If it hit, of course.

Harry lifted his arm, and the hex slammed into the combined Shield Charms on his bracelet. For a moment, the green light clung, shimmering, as if it would force its way through after all; it was a powerful spell, and Remus had doubtless been annoyed when he cast it.

Then it turned around and flew back at Remus, who, a moment later, was stunned and tied up, the ropes binding his arms together behind his back and his legs out in front of him. Harry heard a few students gasping, others laughing or clapping, but most of them just stared in stunned silence.

Harry turned around and bowed his head. "Another useful defense is nested Shield Charms," he said casually. "They'll provide more strength and protection, even against really nasty hexes and Dark Arts, than just one will. Of course, you've got to have the time to cast them, and you have to be powerful to cast and maintain several in a row. Focusing them on an object helps." He displayed the bracelet, and thought, Weaving them in between isolation wards at your old abandoned house works, too.

"I want to know how to do that," Hermione demanded. "I've never heard of it."

Harry glanced at poor Remus. "Let me get Professor Lupin revived first, and then I'll teach you all you like," he said, and concentrated on making the ropes vanish and Remus return to consciousness. Remus was properly embarrassed about it all, but held no grudge, and settled down to working with the students who wanted to try the Absorption Charm. Harry kept an eye on them, and was satisfied that

even those who first stared at Remus and trembled soon warmed up to him.

He kept making circles of the group, adjusting dueling partners when one of the pair got the spell right away or was too obviously powerful, patiently coaching Neville not to stutter on the Protego incantation, reminding two third-years who wanted to learn Dark Arts that he needed their parents' permission. It was on his fourth or fifth circle that he became aware of someone near the other side of the lake, watching, and turned to look.

He scowled when he saw Snape, and turned away. He doesn't need to watch. I'm not going to get myself killed, not with Remus here. And he should go talk to Pansy, anyway. She needs his help, and she'd talk to him, since he's Head of Slytherin House.

I think I'll suggest that to him when we have to go inside, in fact.

Harry would have felt better about his little joke if the speed with which darkness fell hadn't reminded him of the nearness of the autumnal equinox, and the attack that Voldemort intended to launch then.

Entertaining, Honoria Pemberley decided, stretching out her wings and shaking them once as she saw the dueling club breaking up to go back inside Hogwarts. Our little leader is a good teacher, too.

She'd carefully watched everything from the time she got there in her gull form—well, at least from the time she'd stopped deciding it was fun to interrupt Harry as he talked. Yes, he was a leader. He was alert enough to know when his opponent was going to cast a nonverbal spell, and to prepare an all-purpose defense against it. He faced and met challenges head-on. And even his very interesting scowl at the Potions Master didn't interrupt his pace or his talk; Harry's voice was still as low and placid, his stride as firm, as before. He really did like helping others, Honoria thought, as she saw him absorbed in the teaching. He went outside himself, forgot whatever troubles plagued

him, and became more interested in others' efforts than Honoria had managed to be even when she was a student.

She wondered if that was such a good thing or not, then clacked her break. Tybalt and John and I will just watch out for him if he can't watch out for himself.

She took off across the lake, debating her course as she went. Shoulder or hair? Shoulder or hair?

In the end, the wind made the decision for her as she passed above the Potions Master and lifted her tail. The white splatter she meant to hit his hair blew sideways and struck the shoulder of his robes instead. Snape reared back, glaring, and pointed his wand at her, but Honoria was already out of reach, cackling the gull-laughter she knew most people despised.

That's for too many Potions exams that you marked down, she thought, as she wheeled home, as well as for whatever upset you've caused our beloved and glorious leader.

She couldn't wait to get home and contact Tybalt. He would wonder how she got onto Hogwarts grounds and stayed there so undetected.

Honoria would smile, and smile, and never tell.

Chapter Twenty: Like a Very Chiron

Harry could not say how relieved he was when Acies finally swept into the Defense classroom. He was sure that these mixed classes of McGonagall's were a good idea. He could cling to that in the abstract, and, of course, he could always take comfort in the fact that there were a few other Slytherins with him; McGonagall seemed to have arranged things so that Harry always attended class with at least two of his yearmates.

But for him personally, most of the classes were a stew of violent emotion. There were always people with pity on their faces. There were a few people who asked him each time why he had accused Dumbledore of child abuse, why it couldn't have been handled more quietly, and their numbers were growing. There were those who grumbled and muttered and questioned why Harry himself appeared to have been so instrumental in the Dark Lord's return, and Harry thought he could almost see their emotions spreading from one to another like a disease. He would have thought it was a spell, but no spell he knew of answered the description of this.

He put most of the emotions down to his oversensitivity, which thought any mutter lately had to do with him, and did his best to relax and calm himself. But Defense, he knew, was going to be particularly bad, and it was only the first class they'd had. Margaret from Ravenclaw was in that class, and Millicent and Pansy, but not Draco. Margaret was stirring up suspicion of him, currently, by telling others that Harry intended to teach Dark Arts in the meetings of the dueling club, and Pansy was a cold stiff presence at his side.

Harry could feel himself relax when Acies walked through the door. She was still wearing the pale, gown-like robes she had since the first day at school, but this time, Harry could see that the sleeves were tipped with green, a Slytherin color. He frowned, wondering how many people would note the subtle symbolism, both of the hue and of the two colors working together. Together, they signaled the end of winter and the coming of spring.

Never mind that this is entirely the wrong season of the year to be wearing them, Harry thought, and lifted his eyes to Acies's face. For

just a moment, her gaze met his—not enough to flash the wild power he knew was in it down his throat. Instead, Acies turned away and paced to the front of the room. Most of the students were silent, watching her. Harry knew they were curious about this Professor Merryweather. The reports coming out of the other classes had been strangely mixed. Some of them liked her, and some of them were terrified.

“I will ask you to tell me,” Acies said abruptly, voice breaking the silence with a low hiss, “what you know of the nature of sacrifice.”

Harry told himself that most heads did not turn to look at him. That was just his oversensitivity at work again.

Pansy clasped his arm. Harry leaned towards her, and she said into his ear, “I wish you to tell the professor that I know sacrifice very well. It is at the core of the necromantic arts. Without giving up our ability to speak, and our names, and our connections with the outside world, we would not gain the privilege and honor of speaking with the dead.” She paused, with a slight sneer. “Make sure that she knows the answer comes from me.”

Harry nodded, and then turned towards Acies and raised his hand. More people stared. Harry ignored that, and concentrated on not looking Acies too directly in the face when she called on him, relating what Pansy had said word for word.

“Three points to Slytherin,” said Acies, and that was another thing they had heard about her, Harry remembered, that she always gave points in threes. “Ask Miss Parkinson if she knows why giving up these particular sacrifices is so powerful, Mr. Potter.”

Pansy was ready with the answer when Harry turned to her. “Because they’re things that normal people can’t do, and necromancers have to give up being normal people.”

Acies just shook her head when Harry repeated that, though. “No. Any sacrifice would do. These happen to be the ones that the studies demand, and have demanded over long years, so that they are hallowed by tradition. But the most important nature of the sacrifices,

one way to separate them from what the Dark Lord did in cutting Mr. Potter's hand off, is their willingness. A willing sacrifice is always more powerful."

Harry flushed as more people turned to look at him, but kept his head high. He'd been the one who chose not to wear a glamour.

And what Acies was saying made sense, and was ancient magical theory. A shame so many people, even Margaret from Ravenclaw, were scrambling to write it down as if it were new, he thought.

"A life laid down," Acies said, pacing back and forth in front of the class with a swirl of her robes, "a limb cut off willingly, a privilege yielded without grumbling, forms the corner and the core of all sacrifices that most wizards trust. Without that corner and that core, sacrifice is usually seen as evil, or, at most, dubious magic. What can be done with blood and flesh and other things not given willingly? A great deal, but not as much as can be done with that yielded. The wizard's will adds its own sanction to the spell or the potion or the ritual performed with that willing sacrifice." Her eyes lingered on Harry's face for a moment. "The one the sacrifice is performed for grows more willing himself, more able, more powerful. Perhaps he will even be able to survive whatever storm comes after that yielding."

Harry's heart was beating oddly. Though he had lived with sacrifice all his life, he hadn't thought about that particular aspect in any depth, no more than he thought about making wands because he carried one. He wondered, in a sudden, searing realization, if Sirius's and Sylaana's willingly given lives had been one reason he was able to fight and defeat Voldemort after they died.

"I want you, all of you," said Acies, "to think about what you have given up yourself, and whether it was willing or not. Make me a list." She drew a parchment from no place Harry could see, perhaps one of the long sleeves, and slammed it down in the middle of the table before her. "Tell me now."

More people scrambled for quills, Harry among them. He braced the paper with the stump of his left hand and began to write. Some of

them, like his hand and the loss of time to help other people, were easy.

Others, he had to think about. Was it really a sacrifice, for example, what he had done for Connor? Sometimes it seemed that way, and sometimes it seemed as though it could not have been because he'd been tricked into it, not allowed to truly make up his mind about what he wanted to yield to help his brother. But that would just be an unwilling sacrifice, he supposed. He bit his lip and wrote.

"Read your list aloud to me," said Acies after about five minutes, and pointed a finger at the back of the classroom. "You."

Harry turned, and was distantly amused to see that Acies had called on Margaret. She flushed and started to read in a mumble, but Acies cut her off. "Stand and read in a loud, clear voice," she said. "I will not have you crouch in a corner and talk as if you are ashamed. This class is not the place for anyone ashamed of what they are. You have made sacrifices, taken from you or willingly laid down. We are going to talk about them in a spirit of defiance and pride."

Sidelong glances towards Professor Merryweather were becoming more and more frequent. Harry could see now why everyone, from the sixth-year students to the first-years, had such a mixed opinion of her. Some would regard her with awe. Some would think she wasn't being serious and would look for the joke, only to realize slowly that there wasn't one.

Margaret coughed, and stood. She began to read out an ordinary litany of parents' time surrendered to younger siblings, toys broken or lost, privileges revoked when she'd become sulky. Harry tried to listen, but most of his attention was on Acies, standing with her hands behind her back like a soldier.

Then Margaret read out, "And a day's time of study and classes lost in my second year, because Potter cast my hex back at me, and sent me to the hospital wing." She lowered her list and scowled at Harry.

Harry looked back at her. He didn't know what to say. But then, lately, that wasn't an uncommon occurrence. With Snape and with Draco,

he didn't know what to say, either, and as he watched McGonagall's face grow grimmer over breakfast and Fawkes scolded him for his foolishness in entering Voldemort's mind every day, he felt increasingly lost.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry blinked and glanced over at Acies. "Yes, Professor Merryweather?" He was glad that he'd practiced her name, or he would probably have called her Professor Lestrangle without thought. It wasn't every Light witch that could look that commanding.

"What Miss Parsons says," said Acies implacably. "Is it true? Did you cause her to lose a day of her time in the hospital wing?"

Harry was grateful just to be able to say a solid, "Yes," without wavering. That part of it was objective fact, and most people knew it, though right now they were murmuring as if the reminder could not have come at a worse—or better—time. He waited, never looking away from Acies, even to meet Margaret's glare.

For a moment, he caught a glimpse of dragon. Then Acies looked back at Margaret, and asked, "And what were your motives for doing so, Mr. Potter?"

Here's the tricky part. But Harry knew that if he lied now, or even said anything less evil than the truth, no one would believe him. And even after just a week, he was sick of drifting frantically among the shards of his emotions and wondering what to say. Everyone—Draco, Snape, Remus, Argutus, Fawkes, Pansy, Regulus—advised something different, told him that I'm sorry wasn't enough but wanted it said, or desired something from him that Harry didn't know how to give, mostly Snape. Harry had kept this weakness quiet, since every time he did reach out, he got all those contradictory answers.

"At the time, I was possessed," he said quietly. "That was the year several students were paralyzed and placed in the hospital wing. For the first part of the year, I carried the possessor, Tom Riddle, in my head. He was the one who turned the hex. I didn't know how to do it."

The class buzzed and sang. Harry sat still and watched Acies's eyes.

"Liar," said Margaret loudly, stirring a bit of anger in Harry. He had spoken the truth. What did she want or expect him to say? That he'd hated her personally, enough to want to hex her into pain? "You don't need another presence in your head to want to do that," she continued. "You carry enough evil to do it all on your own."

Harry wondered if he should say something in response to that—both Millicent and Pansy were staring at him as if he should—but Acies got to it first, as she swung her head crisply around to face Margaret.

"You cannot lie to me," she said. "None of you can lie to me. My eyes see truth. I am named for insight, keenness of mind. And I know that you do not believe what you are saying right now, Miss Parsons. I see the lie resting in your mind, the frightened worm crouching behind your eyes. You heard the rumors of possession later in the year, and believed them.

"Even as Mr. Potter should respect your sacrifice, and know what he cost other people around him, you should respect his, and know what evil he was condemned to carry in his head. Making a sacrifice does not exempt you from acknowledging that other people have done the same." Acies held her hand above her head, and her fingers began moving oddly, as though something were trapped in her palm. Harry saw a feathered head project above her knuckles a moment later, and then a green bird was perched there, a bird whose feathers, if you looked at them too closely, resembled scales. It had a blue crest of feathers, which it laid back as it screamed at the startled students, and brilliant red eyes, mad in the way that only a bird's eyes could be mad. It took off and fluttered towards the ceiling of the room, not distracting attention from Acies's words but seeming to draw the students back towards them.

"I created that bird from my magic. If any of you were to destroy it now, you would be wasting my sacrifice and not respecting it.

"This is what we are prone to forget. As we move through the world, caught up in what we have given and will give, we forget that others have made sacrifices similar to ours, sometimes larger, sometimes

more willing. We compare, and always find ourselves in the favored positions, those who have given the most and deserve to be treated with the most respect. Or we degrade ourselves, and say that others have given more, but imagine that some reward for the degradation still awaits us. We will show them, someday. Someday, the people we gave up the sacrifices for will turn to us with tears and love in their eyes. The idea of future reward makes far too many gifts less valuable than they should be.

“Remembering that sacrifice lies everywhere, threaded and torn through every soul, and forgetting to compare, is what I will teach you this term.”

The green bird dropped down from the ceiling and circled Acies’s head. She lifted up her arms. For a moment, just a moment, Harry had the impression that the shadow of enormous wings was passing over him, even though he could not actually see it. He saw the way Acies looked at the bird, and knew one of her sacrifices, at that moment, as surely as if she had told him.

Acies carried part of a dragon within her, and with that, she had given up part of what it meant to be human.

Harry closed his eyes. Awe, an emotion he hadn’t felt in far too long a time, was beating in his ears like a drum. He had been lifted and transported out of himself, far away from the confusing, dizzying assault of emotions, and he had badly needed it. For a moment, he thought he could catch a glimpse of the gifts and the sacrifices around him, and he was filled with wonder.

“On Thursday,” said Acies, “I will begin to teach you the meaning of sacrificial ethics, and how easily they can be twisted, and what the Dark Arts do to those who give up too much of themselves. Class dismissed.”

Harry shook his head and slowly stood, still caught in a waking dream. Thus, it did not seem strange when Millicent, whom he’d asked to be his delegate to the centaurs last year, leaned over to him and whispered, “Potter, one of the centaurs contacted me this morning.

He wants you to meet with him in the Forbidden Forest at sunset tonight. His name is Firenze.”

“I know him,” Harry said, and felt his heart pick up the pace, bounding, quickening. He did not know what the centaurs wanted, but at the moment, he felt more bound to them than he had in a long time—and with no evil, wizard-planted web, either, but with the common interest he’d once told the Seer Vera he felt. The wonder, that other people existed in the world and were what they were, beat in his throat like a second pulse.

On the way out of the classroom, he glanced at Acies. She had the green bird in her hands, and was staring at it. She smelled of smoke and fire, and one of her sleeves was partially singed away.

Harry smiled slightly. He suspected that a mixed report of this class would spread around, too.

Harry walked calmly through the edge of the Forest, Draco at his side. He’d told Draco what he intended to do at sunset, and asked if he wanted to come with him. Draco had chosen to do so at once, though scolding Harry, all the while, about taking another potentially stupid risk.

The words rolled off Harry as they would not have only a few hours earlier. He was remembering Draco’s own sacrifices, the danger he’d put him in by going into Voldemort’s mind a week ago, and feeling his affection surge, keen and strong as sunlight on the waves. That was the best reason to avoid taking that kind of risk. Not because someone else would be angry at him if he did something stupid, but because he knew it would mark and endanger another person in a way that Harry didn’t want him marked and endangered. Add that it was Draco, and Harry wanted him to have even more freedom and choice than he might want for others, and Harry knew, with a quiet strength that impressed him, that that kind of risk would not be happening again.

The steady beat of hooves made Harry lift his head from the path of crumpled, faded leaves at his feet. The centaur Firenze stood in front of them, tail swishing slightly. He had a palomino body and blue eyes

that marked and pierced Harry from where he stood. Harry stared back, and felt the double heartbeat of anticipation and wonder pick up in him.

“Harry Potter,” said Firenze. “The stars are bright tonight, and we have found how to lift our web.”

Harry had suspected something like this when Firenze took the trouble to notify Millicent. He didn’t shout out objections, like the one Scrimgeour had given him, about the centaurs raping people if they were freed. This was too sacred for that. He just nodded.

“Show me,” he said.

Firenze reared, planting his hooves solidly when he came down, and then wheeled and trotted into the Forest. Harry followed, feeling Draco, behind him, reach out and place a hand on the small of his back, much the way he had done when escorting him towards the dungeons last week. He smiled slightly and leaned into the pressure, but kept his eyes always ahead, on Firenze’s swishing, pale tail.

They turned away from the parts of the Forest that Harry was familiar with—the clearing where he had once dueled Voldemort, the bend in the path where he had seen Quirrell drinking unicorn’s blood, the hill where rocks like a gallows awaited. They walked for a long time, long enough that darkness fell and Harry called Lumos into being on the end of his wand. Draco kept muttering words, but they were low enough under his breath that Harry thought he was frightened.

He didn’t turn and reassure him, though. Draco wouldn’t want this kind of fear acknowledged.

At last, the trail dipped violently, and Harry realized they were heading into a wide hollow, on a considerably lower level than the rest of the Forest. Draco stumbled. Harry reached back, gripping his arm and holding him upright, even as he stared, trying to make out the dimensions of the place they’d come into.

The sides of it were stone, the tree roots running out about halfway down the wall. The more he looked, the more Harry thought those

stones, though they looked natural, had still been cut and fitted into place. They shone fiercely, and here and there a rippling shadow like a four-legged shape slid across them and was gone. The path down into the made valley was also meant for a being with four legs and not two, Harry thought, as they carefully negotiated it. Draco had drawn his wand, but luckily wasn't aiming it at anything.

Firenze waited for them at the bottom of the trail. His hooves were planted deeply in lush grass that Harry could smell summer leaking from. He paused and looked up at Firenze in question.

"We were given this place," said Firenze, his voice seeming to echo from the stones. "We were not meant to stray from here. It is summer here, and there are enchanting sounds and sights that were supposed to contribute to keeping us prisoner." He reared, and he did not look at all like a horse—or, if he did, Harry thought, it was a warhorse, trained to bite and kick and trample, as dangerous as its rider. "We have not stayed here, but we find ourselves drawn back. That ends tonight." He walked towards the center of the valley.

Harry could sense the glamours trailing them as they followed. Glimpses of indescribable beauty appeared and brushed against his face—seas, high and lonely deserts, hills shining with rain. Draco's pace slackened once or twice, but Harry always pulled gently and got him moving again. Draco muttered each time, to say that he hadn't been fooled and was coming, just a minute.

Something awaited them in the middle of the valley. Harry studied it as they drew nearer, but only when they were a foot or two away from it did all the impressions seem to rush together and show him what it was at once.

A vaguely familiar chestnut centaur was kneeling between two upright stones, his forelegs folded under his chest. Ropes held up his arms and tied them to the stones. Harry remembered the noose that the centaurs had used on Draco that first year, and suspected that this was more of the same stuff. Above the stones, from one to the other, ran a metal crossbar, and more ropes extended from it, lashed around the centaur's hind legs, which were splayed behind him.

The centaur glanced up. Harry struggled to recall the name that belonged with those dark hair and blackberry eyes, and finally managed to say, "Coran."

"The same," said Coran. "You have come, vates, in sight of the stars and in sight of the stones."

The moment he finished speaking, a kind of magic Harry had never felt before sang out from the rocks. Harry shivered. This was not precisely music, but stabbing spikes of sound that drove in through his eyes and ears both and made the teeth ring in his head, shrill and alien as the—

As the tap of hooves on metal.

Harry turned his head to the side as similar sounds answered the music of the magic. Centaurs were coming out of the trees, each one wearing a steel drum on a strap around his neck. The strap was long enough to let the instrument dangle nearly to the level of his hooves, and so each one would advance a step, then curl up one foreleg and bring it down on the drum's surface, then advance another step. The magic fed from the sounds, and Harry's breath grew short as the power dizzied him.

"What the hell is going on?" Draco whispered.

"The breaking of our web," said Firenze, hearing and answering him. He gestured to the bound and helpless Coran. "We have looked at our web, and we know what the power of a willing sacrifice can do. We wish to alter our nature. When we are no longer a danger to others, then we can be free, and we will harm no one." For a moment, he turned his head, his blue eyes catching Harry's. "The vates will no longer hesitate for fear of our committing rape."

"I would fear to set you free when such freedom seems a submission to the wizards who bound you, though," said Harry quietly. "If you change what you are, then will they not have won?"

"We were bound long, long ago," said Firenze in return, even as the centaurs halted and there came an end to the painful drumbeats,

though not the piercing, sticking sensation of the magic. “We cannot remember precisely what we were when free. Freedom alone is what remains in our memories, as a dream hungered and hoped for and sent from the stars. We have changed, Harry Potter, vates. We know what we are now, and what we are would not wish to rape. We know only that we would, set free. And so long as you fear that would happen, you will not break our net.”

Harry had to nod. That much was true. He would not impinge on the free will and safety of others by simply snapping the centaurs’ web when he knew the consequences that followed would be his fault.

“So we have chosen,” said Firenze. “Legend after legend, across the centuries, bespeaks the power of sacrifice. And one of the legends bespeaks more. There was a centaur named Chiron, it is said—almost alone among the centaurs of Greece, wise and kind, while the others were drunkards and rapists.” Harry darted a quick glance at Firenze’s face, but it was blank, and his voice as he spoke was calm. “And he was immortal, and a tutor of heroes. But he took a wound at the hands of Heracles, and because he could not die, he suffered from it endlessly. In the end, he sacrificed his immortality and earned peace from his pain—but he used the sacrifice to free Prometheus the bound and suffering, to insure that someone else could continue in painless life.”

Firenze slammed a hoof into the earth. “So says that legend. Other legends speak of different motives for Chiron, and even immortality coming to him after death. But we are not immortal, and we choose to take this legend as our inspiration.. We are centaurs, we wish to be free, and we have chosen to change ourselves to become like Chiron. Every one of us has freely consented.” He turned his head again, and his eyes were fiercer and brighter than Harry had ever seen them. “That consent is part of the sacrifice, that we give up part of what we were to transform ourselves into something new. And the other part of it is a willing death, and a willing hand to take that life.” He was staring at Harry without blinking now.

Harry swallowed. “You want me to kill Coran,” he said, not making it a question.

"You can't do that," said Draco angrily, from behind his shoulder. "You can't make him do that."

"No," said Firenze. "No one can make a vates do anything, or he becomes less than a vates. We can but ask."

Harry studied the centaur's face, aware of Draco taking furious breaths behind him, and his own emotions, a boiling mixture. He wondered how long it had taken the centaurs to decide this, and Coran to come to the notion of sacrificing his life. He had no doubt they were telling the truth, though. If they were not, then the magic would fail. Something like this had to be willing. Acies was perfectly right. Willing sacrifices raised the power of the spell. Conceivably, someone could take Coran's blood against his will and attempt the transformation, but the ritual would be much weaker.

So, now, what they waited on was his consent.

Harry looked at Coran. He had not known him very well. He hated the thought of killing. He hated the thought that his hand would take a life even in war, which was the reason he had tried not to fight any of the Death Eaters but Voldemort with lethal force. And perhaps if he had never killed at all, he would have found this impossible.

As it was, he had no innocence to lose. And he knew what murder looked like. Murder had stared at him with bulging eyes as shards of silver sliced his throat open, and broken apart in a rain of ashes over the lake.

This was not murder. This was a task that they were asking him to fulfill.

Acies's words about respecting sacrifice rang in his head, and Harry nodded. "Tell me what I must do," he said, bringing his eyes back to Firenze's.

Draco grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. "Harry," he whispered. "You can't. It'll destroy you." His face was pale and strained. "I ought to stun you and drag you back to Hogwarts."

“Draco, you wouldn’t get out of here alive if you did that,” said Harry, knowing he spoke the truth. The centaurs had been ready to hang Draco in first year to test Harry. They would not kill out of malice, but they would bring about the death of anyone who interfered in this ritual, because it was too sacred to be disturbed. “And I want to do it.”

“Why, Harry, for Merlin’s sake?”

Harry found himself smiling. He thought it must be an odd smile, from the way Draco stared at him. He didn’t care. “Because I respect them,” he said. “And I honor them, and I can only imagine the honor they’re doing me, the only wizard they felt able to call on for help.” He gentled his voice when he saw the frantic concern in Draco’s eyes. For the first time in a week, the lingering remnants of anger had come down from between them, and Harry knew that Draco was purely worried for him. It felt, sneakily, wonderful. “I promise that I’ll be all right, Draco. I wouldn’t do this if I thought it could destroy me.”

“You tend to overestimate what you think you can bear, Harry.” Draco’s hand settled on his shoulder again. “Please, don’t do this.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “That’s true, Draco, but in this case, they’re also making sacrifices, ones that are dependent on and entwined with the ones that I make. I won’t fail them.”

Draco clenched his wand, and Harry could see the notion of interfering flicker across his face. Then he looked around at the centaurs, and closed his eyes and gave a little grimace.

“Promise me that you’ll pull out of there if you think you’re faltering,” he whispered.

“I would have to,” said Harry, and reached up to kiss his forehead. “I wouldn’t have a choice. That would just waste Coran’s life and their commitment.”

Draco nodded, but turned his head aside as Harry walked towards the stones, as if he couldn’t watch. Harry understood that. He knelt down in front of Coran, facing him, according to Firenze’s soft instructions.

Coran looked back at him. He was not quite calm, the white of his eyes standing out like a horse's, but he had an expression of fierce determination on his face. Harry felt near helpless with admiration.

"Here is the blade."

Firenze gave Harry a knife. Harry moved it through a patch of moonlight, and blinked as it seemed to disappear. Then it reappeared again when he held it towards Coran, a thin edge of blue-silver. Made of light, he thought. Could a blade made of light hurt someone?

Then he thought of sunshine focused through a prism, and how it could burn, and nodded. It can if it's intense enough.

"First you must cut a lock of his hair," said Firenze. "It was a custom of mourning, to cut the hair. It says farewell to the past, and what we have been. Cut by your hand, taken from his head, symbolizing our decision, it binds all three of the sacrifices undertaken this day." He was chanting the words by the end, and when he stopped, the tapping of the hooves on the metal drums began again.

Harry nodded, then reached up, bracing his stump against Coran's forehead, to cut the nearest dark lock. The knife severed it almost before he knew what was happening, and it fell into the heel of his hand as he tilted it hastily to catch the slight weight.

It should have been slight weight, at least. Harry gasped. The lock felt like a stone instead, weighing his hand down, moving it towards the center of the world. He knelt again, and felt the air thicken, the magic dancing around him like a wind, like a storm. The only sensation he could compare it to was that of a prophecy coming true.

"The hair is taken," Firenze intoned. "It must be placed into the mouth of the sacrifice."

Harry stood up. Coran had his mouth open. Harry gently placed the piece of hair between his teeth, and Coran closed his lips and held on.

"We do this in memory of Chiron," Firenze chanted. "And as he was a healer in life, he dealt with blood, and he bled before he could die. Take the blood of the sacrifice from the right shoulder, where we believe Chiron was wounded."

Harry took a deep breath, and then turned and sliced the knife across Coran's shoulder. He winced at the first sight of the blood, but forced himself to glance at Firenze, who had trotted forward to stand beside him. Firenze's gaze was ancient, cold, emotionless as the stars themselves, looking from above.

"Smear your hand with the blood," he told Harry, "and anoint his throat."

Harry obeyed, curling his fingers awkwardly to keep from dropping the knife. The blood felt odd, warmer on his hand than it should have. He found Coran looking at him as he smeared it into place, and he stared back, wondering all the while what kind of life the young centaur had had. What had made him decide to do this? Love for what his people could be? Desire for freedom? Because he could do nothing else?

Harry was never going to know, and that increased his awe and his sorrow, so that they bled into and fed off each other, and increased his determination to do this right.

The magic closed in with a roll when Harry finished smearing all the blood. Now all Harry could see was himself, Coran, the device of stones and rope that bound Coran, and Firenze.

"We do this in memory of Chiron," Firenze repeated. "And now the hair is placed in the sacrifice's mouth, and the blood is smeared upon the sacrifice's throat. Coran, whose very name resembles Chiron's, has given his life. We have given our will." The pressure of the magic grew so tight that Harry could hardly breathe. "And the vates gives his consent."

"I do," said Harry, unsure if he should speak, but finding the words pulled from him.

“Then cut the sacrifice’s throat,” Firenze whispered. “Follow the path of the blood.”

Harry shivered, and stood to his full height. Even with Coran kneeling, it still wasn’t easy to reach his throat. Harry wished he was taller, and then felt an odd spasm of amusement. This was certainly the strangest reason he would ever have to wish that he had grown already, he thought.

He let his breath rush in and out of his lungs, and listened to Coran’s breathing, and recalled Acies’s words. As we move through the world, caught up in what we have given and will give, we forget that others have made sacrifices similar to ours, sometimes larger, sometimes more willing.

Coran’s sacrifice was willing. Harry had to trust that, and to think that there was no reason he would try to trick Harry, and the same thing with the centaurs’ giving their consent to this.

Wonder made him squeeze his eyes shut. When all that had been given, dare he falter now and refuse to do his part, or claim that he could find a better way of doing things? He had to recognize his limitations sometimes, had to yield his judgment to the will of others sometimes.

He reached up, and Coran tilted back his head, showing the path of the blood clearly in the strange, intense, limited light they were enclosed within. Luckily, the path of the smear included his jugular vein.

Harry took a last deep breath, feeling as if he were drawing it for both of them, and then sliced along the path.

Blood rushed forward.

The life flickered once in Coran’s blackberry eyes, but the intensity never ended until he did. Then his head dropped forward, holding the sliced throat.

Silence rushed over them.

Harry found himself utterly alone. Darkness was above him, and darkness below, and clouds pressed in on his ears and his chest and his heart. The knife had slipped from his fingers; he did not know where it had gone. Above him, when he tilted his head back, he saw the stars gleaming, in the image of a centaur with something in his arms.

Centaurus, he thought, distantly. The constellation Chiron was made into.

The darkness and silence broke apart, and noise and light returned with a crash.

Harry cried out as he felt the magic snap past him like a newly released flood. Part of it came from him, he thought, fueled by his will, and another part from the body of Coran hanging by its ropes, and another part from the centaurs grouped in the clearing. It slammed together, and leaped and cut through itself like foaming waves, and then it turned and dug into the centaurs.

Harry could feel the emotion propelling the rush: stern and unrelenting joy. He drew in breath that was hurried and frenzied, both because he could not take in enough of air that had joy, and not wind, as its supreme element, and because the magic continued to draw ruthlessly from him. He had promised to this, committed to this, and so had Coran, and so had the centaurs.

Made threefold, given three times over, this was not a flow of will that could be stopped or turned aside.

Harry felt the moment when the centaurs changed, when the magic performed the transformation they had committed to, took away the wild brutality that made them rape, and made them wise and gentle. It was a wrenching sideways snap, out of a world that had been and into a new one. It was a birth. It was an awakening, and a rising of a phoenix on fire-born wings. The centaurs cried out, and their voices changed as they did so.

The power pierced Harry again, and pulled more and more magic from him like blood. For the first time, he felt it working completely independently of him, to undo the web that bound the centaurs. He had promised, and meant the promise, and that was all he had had to do. The centaurs had promised, and meant the promise, and they were changed. Now the magic glimmered, tracing out the threads of the web in white fire, and then sinking into and burning them from the outside, raising inner flames that made them implode at the same time. Harry felt that stern joy dismiss the strands of the web as something ugly, unneeded, and unable to stand against the power that it could summon.

And then it was over, too abruptly. Harry felt as if he were in freefall for a moment, until he landed. He found himself panting, kneeling again, back in his human body, and the light was gone. He swallowed to keep from crying out at the loss.

He lifted his head to find the clearing transformed. The walls were roots and dirt now, and looked the better for it. The grass was as brown as it should be with the approach of autumn, and covered with dead leaves.

Coran's body hung on the stones, and glimmered, the last remnants of the joy withdrawing into him. He looked nothing more, and nothing less, than dead.

Firenze's hoofbeats recalled Harry's attention to him. The centaur had a smile on his face, a true smile, the first time Harry could remember seeing one. He scooped Harry gently up in his arms and set him on his back.

"We are more of this world now," he said, "more of the earth than the stars, though they shall always speak to us. Come, vates. Let us get you home." Harry looked around for Draco, and saw another centaur kneeling to collect him. He nodded, and clung to Firenze's mane, and closed his eyes.

Awe was still shaking him, a continuation of that humility that had snatched him out of himself in Defense, but deeper, darker, more radiant, more sacred. Harry found himself keenly alive to the centaurs

around them, wondering what they were thinking. Did they miss what they had been? Or would they, once the shock and thrill of the newness wore off?

It was good of Firenze and his fellow to let Harry and Draco ride them back, a generous gift, a sign of pride and honor. Harry felt part of his awe turn into gratitude.

What was Draco thinking? Harry found that he could not wait to know. He would ask once they got back to Hogwarts, and give what assurances were needed. Perhaps he would do the same thing with other people, if they had questions. Would Millicent still want to be his delegate to the centaurs? Perhaps they would not need one. What was Pansy thinking about this? Would McGonagall be relieved to know that she no longer had to worry about the centaurs attacking people who went into the Forest?

What was Snape thinking?

Harry blinked, and licked his lips, and opened his eyes to see the edge of the Forest looming closer.

He did not feel like someone who had just killed, whose parents were on trial for child abuse, who had felt betrayed by his guardian only that morning. He was exalted, at peace, lifted into the heights and wrapped in comforting darkness.

He had been reminded that there was a world outside himself again, one he could take a vital and active interest in, and that one mistake did not mean the end of everything.

On anyone's part. No one's mistake means the end of everything. We can inflict deep wounds, but the wounds can heal.

Harry nodded, a small, decisive movement of his head against Firenze's neck, and closed his eyes. The resolve he made then had worry behind it, of course, but also its own stern, deep joy.

I'll talk to Snape tomorrow. It is time I respected his sacrifice.

Chapter Twenty-One: Forgiveness and Mercy

Harry suspected that Snape wouldn't want him to wait for the morning, although Draco, walking behind him, uttered a little groan of disappointment when they passed the door to the Slytherin common room.

Harry glanced at him over his shoulder. "Are you sure that you don't want to stay behind?"

"Not if you're going where I think you're going." Draco squared his shoulders, as if he thought that would somehow diminish his weariness. "You'll probably come out of this fight just as tired as I am, and I'll need to carry you back to Slytherin." For a moment, his face brightened. "I'd enjoy that."

"I don't know," said Harry thoughtfully. "I've seen sense. Perhaps Snape will manage to see some."

"Sometimes, you're no fun," said Draco.

Harry frowned at him, but Draco refused to explain what he meant. Harry shrugged. "Just don't interfere in the fight, please, Draco," he said. "Snape and I need to—" He paused, then waved a hand vaguely before him, hoping that it would stand in for the words he didn't know how to pronounce. "Really fight," he said. "Really talk. Smash the barriers. If we don't, then I can't expect him to understand what I felt out in the Forest tonight."

"I still don't understand how whatever you felt in the Forest encouraged you to forgive Professor Snape," Draco muttered as they turned the final corner and came to a halt before the door of Snape's office. Harry hadn't been here in months, and, for a moment, the knowledge dizzied him. He'd spent the summer away from Snape and Hogwarts before, but then he'd been back inside this office a day after returning to school. He shook his head and knocked.

"If I can understand what drove a sacrifice like Coran's, then I can understand what drove a sacrifice like Snape's," said Harry. "That doesn't mean I'm suddenly going to fall into his arms sobbing, but—"

“Mr. Potter. Mr. Malfoy.”

And there was Snape, and suddenly this was harder than Harry had known it would be. He took a deep breath and faced his guardian. “Hello, sir,” he said quietly. He didn’t know which emotion would come out in his voice, but it turned out to be a mild one—regret, or possibly melancholy. “I have something to say to you, and Draco wants to witness it. Can we come in?”

Snape stared at him. Harry knew the emotion in his eyes: hope. And why not? This was the first time that Harry had treated him with less than severe coldness since his parents’ arrest.

“Come in,” said Snape, almost as if he were repeating Harry’s words rather than issuing an invitation. He moved aside and gestured for Harry to take a seat on one of the chairs. Harry walked into the office, but remained standing. He didn’t want Snape to think they weren’t on equal footing, and Snape already had a height advantage.

“Sir,” he murmured, “I want to tell you that I understand, a bit better now, what you were giving up in sending the information about my parents and Dumbledore to the Ministry. You thought I would hate you, didn’t you? You expected that you’d forfeited the right to be my guardian, any trace of a bond beyond teacher and student.”

Snape’s eyes were large and dark in his pale face. Harry wondered how much sleep he’d been getting. It was a question he would have been unable to picture himself giving a damn about this morning, unless he were considering Snape and other sleep-deprived victims together.

“I did think that, Harry,” said Snape. “But I kept hoping that you would forgive me, and I would not have sacrificed so much after all.” He clenched his teeth down as if he would prevent himself from saying the next words, but they crept out anyway. “Are you forgiving me? Is this what that is?”

Harry flinched a bit. The commitment that had carried him out of the Forest, the remembrance of Snape’s sacrifices, was currently battling

with the remembrance of the churning hostility that Snape's announcement of the crimes had released. Many people seemed to believe that Dumbledore could not be guilty, or else that it should have been handled privately. Perhaps they were right? Harry knew that he would have preferred it that way, at least.

"I'm not as angry as I was," he said, choosing the most sincere response. "That doesn't mean I'm not still angry."

Snape nodded, as if unsurprised. His eyes were drawing in the sight of Harry's face, soaking it in. Harry felt another tremor overtake him. He had not realized how much Snape had missed him.

That's what he was trying to say in McGonagall's office. He really did miss you. It wasn't a plot to pull an emotional reaction from you after all.

Harry rubbed his eyes. The wonder and awe he had felt—he had to keep his mind focused on that. He'd come here intending to tell Snape the whole truth, about how things had to fall out between them now. He couldn't just suffer shock after shock and stare open-mouthed. Perhaps this would be a bit harder than he'd assumed, with more obscure emotions swirling around in his mind like dragonweed in clean water and destroying his distance from the situation, but he had to keep pushing forward.

"I—" said Harry, and then shook his head. "I was tempted to forgive you even before this." He felt Draco shift behind him, as if about to speak, but luckily he kept his mouth shut. "But I didn't know how to tell you what I thought our new standing should be. I don't need a guardian any more."

Snape's eyes grew piercing. "Then that is an enduring disagreement," he said.

Harry sighed. "Why would you want to act as a guardian to me, sir?" he asked. "I haven't been a very good ward."

"All that I have done, I have done for love of you." Harry blinked. That Snape had managed to say the word with both him and Draco there

was astounding. "And I have been a guardian," Snape continued steadily. "My role where you are concerned is defending and protecting you, Harry. And I have put you into some danger that I did not intend with my actions, given how many people seem willing to defend their precious Light Lord." Snape gave that familiar sneer. "I am surprised that there are so many fools in the wizarding world. I do not know why. My life should have taught me not to be an optimist."

He took one of the chairs, which left his eyes more on a level with Harry's. "I can at least protect you from the dangers of my own making, and I wish to protect you from others as well."

"I don't have a good track record with parents," said Harry, deciding he might as well lay this out in the open. "I don't believe that you would ever abuse me the way Lily has, Professor, or look aside from abuse the way James did; you've already proven that. But you've also proven that you wouldn't hesitate to hurt other people, even though I've asked you not to, in the name of keeping me safe." He glanced at Draco over his shoulder as he said that.

"I am sorry for the compulsion I placed on you," Snape said, addressing Draco. "And Harry, I am sorry for lying to you about it. I am not sorry, and will not be, for what I have done to your parents and Dumbledore."

I didn't expect him to be sorry for it. I didn't. Harry told himself that until he believed it. He held Snape's gaze. "But you understand why I don't want you to be my guardian again, sir," he said. "You must. Your definition of the best way to handle my protection and mine do not match up."

"Of course they don't," said Snape. "I imagine that most guardians do not think the same way as the children they protect."

Harry swallowed. He couldn't object that he wasn't a child, or Snape was likely to retort that saying that proved that he was acting childish, and required someone to defend him. "Sir, I'd want to be involved in any future decisions that you make about my protection," he said. "And I don't know if you would allow me that."

"It would depend." Snape seemed to have recovered his balance already, which irritated Harry. He'd come in so determined, so poised on the wings of his revelation in the Forest. Why couldn't he have retained that exalted distance? Instead, he was crawling in the midst of his emotions again. "If I thought that you could understand and react to the situation rationally, I would certainly consult you. I did not this time because I thought you would insist on leaving your parents and Dumbledore free. If a situation like that arises in the future, no, I would not delay saving you because you might not like it." Snape folded his hands. "I am sorry for the consequences of my decision that have had a negative impact on you, Harry. I am not sorry for making it in the first place. What else would you have suggested I do?"

The question was mild, not biting, and Harry seized the chance to talk about it. Perhaps he could convince Snape and bring him around to his side after all. "Handle it privately," he said firmly. "Even with a sudden confrontation. There are things I could have done to confine Dumbledore's magic for a short time, and of course my parents would have been no trouble to handle. Bind them and hold them in a room with us, and I think we could have forced them into acknowledging that what they have done is wrong."

Snape gave a single, sharp cluck of his tongue. "And yet, I heard from the Minister that an attempt to talk to your father resulted in him blaming you for the situation, Harry?"

"He was upset," said Harry evenly. "He didn't know what he was saying. And of course, once the abuse charges were filed, it was probably too late. If we could have done it beforehand—"

"Look me in the eye," said Snape, leaning forward. "You know it is very hard to lie to a Legilimens like that, Harry. Look me in the eye and tell me that you believe your parents and Dumbledore would have changed their minds if you could speak to them privately."

Harry shook his head. "It doesn't matter if I'm a bit uncertain," he said. "I still think it would have been a better method than this."

“Why, if all it did was warn them and not convince them anyway?” Snape was at his calmest. Harry could feel himself edging towards an explosion. He took the anger, crushed it into a small ball, and dropped into one of the Occlumency pools. Some of it leaked back, though, and so Harry counted to ten under his breath before he responded.

“I still think it would have been the best course,” he said. “No need to get the Ministry involved, to have dozens of people upset at the loss of their leader. And we would still have Dumbledore on our side to fight against Voldemort.”

“I believe he would have manipulated you rather than fight the Dark Lord,” said Snape quietly. “He fears you more than him.”

Harry blinked, once, then twice. That hadn’t occurred to him. Of course, Snape is an idiot about things like this sometimes. He’s probably exaggerating, and waiting to see if I notice. “Come off it.”

Snape’s eyebrows rose, and an expression that was neither smile nor scowl curved his mouth. “I am not lying, Mr. Potter, nor even stretching the truth. Albus Dumbledore does fear you. Nothing—not a confrontation, not reasoning, not a promise or an Unbreakable Vow—would have stopped his attempts to gain control of you. Nothing will but his death or the loss of his magic. Either of those is a probable outcome of the trial. I will be satisfied with either.”

Harry went briefly cold inside. He had forgotten that while his revelation in the Forest might have taught him respect and wonder and awe for other souls, Snape hadn’t thought the same thing.

“You made the charges child abuse for that reason, didn’t you?” he asked, voice breaking.

“I made them because that is what they did,” said Snape, his voice snapping like an ice floe. “But yes, I knew that execution was a probable consequence of those particular accusations.”

Harry shook his head. “You’re still a person,” he said. “I’m trying to understand why you did what you did because denying you

forgiveness when you acted out of your personal convictions is silly. And my parents and Dumbledore are still people. I'm not going to try to free them or stop the trial, but—it's just—execution is too extreme a punishment for anything."

He tilted his head back, eyes on Snape's face. "There are people who would have wanted you dead for being a Death Eater," he said quietly. "You didn't deserve it. How can you say that someone else deserves death?"

"Because I feel they do." Snape did not turn a hair. "And I am not the one who does the judging from this point forward, Harry. The Wizengamot will. You have not listened to what I said. I did not bring these charges against your parents and the Headmaster to murder them. If I only cared about their deaths, then I would have killed them myself. I merely knew this could happen, and didn't flinch from it. That is the difference. It is important to me that they be punished. What form the punishment takes is less important."

"It is important to me," said Harry. "I want to stop the Wizengamot from executing anyone. Life in Tullianum, loss of their magic—" He flinched at the thought of his father's face looking like his mother's in the moments after the justice ritual had taken her power, but pushed ahead. "Those would be things I could live with. But not their deaths."

Snape nodded. "I understand."

"But you aren't willing to do anything to change it," said Harry, turning his gaze away.

"Plead for them to live? Drop the charges? Not testify against them?" Snape's voice was becoming sharper and sharper. "No, I am not."

Harry closed his eyes and stood in silence, reminding himself to breathe, striving to recapture the sense of calm clarity he'd had in the Forest. He needed to respect Snape's decision, Snape's sacrifice. Snape had made this decision knowing what it would cost him, and that he and Harry would clash over it, possibly forever. The conviction that must have driven him forward in the face of that was immense.

He did it out of love. Surely you can appreciate that?

I could appreciate it better if not for its being me, Harry thought, and felt a brief flash of amusement. Here we go again. What he did would have been admirable if he were rescuing Draco or Neville or anyone else. But that love of me might cause someone else to die—it's very hard to accept.

"I am glad to be in the same room with the sensation that you don't hate me," Snape said, breaking into Harry's reverie. "Regardless of what you may have thought, Harry, I was not trying to provoke or hurt you with my comments during the first week of school. Merely unwilling to let you withdraw into a cold shell and pretend that I didn't exist."

Harry nodded. "I know that now."

Silence returned. Harry could see Draco looking back and forth between them, obviously trying to read their faces and uneasy about what would happen next. He probably has the right to be, Harry thought. I don't know myself. The fury he'd felt towards Snape was gone, slid and dissolved into a roiling mass of other emotions, but of those emotions—understanding, pity, love, anger, regret, the wish that things could be different—none was dominant enough to tell him how to react towards Snape.

"Perhaps you could tell me what you are willing to accept from me, Harry," Snape said. "I have said that I will not stop defending you. I will not. But I will attempt to consult with you before I make any move so drastic again. I held off on filing the charges for a long period of time, because I wished to do so only when I thought you were being abused and would not defend yourself. Hopefully, that situation will never arise."

Harry hesitated. Then he said, "I suppose I should—I could use your help with Occlumency and Legilimency. I tried to take on the Dark Lord in his mind the other night. He slipped past my defenses and came into my mind instead, and some of my emotional control was abraded by what looked like a snake in his thoughts."

Snape hissed. "That link between the two of you is dangerous," he said. "It should be shut. I believe that you possess the Occlumency to do so, Harry."

Harry stiffened his shoulders. Here was another thing they were going to disagree about, then. "I can't," he said. "The visions are useful in strategy for the war. Thanks to them, we know that he's planning an attack for the autumnal equinox. If I shut the link, then we won't have any idea of what he's doing."

Snape closed his eyes. "I cannot force you to do this," he murmured.

"So glad you realize that." Harry's anger slipped out again, but he swallowed it, and went on. "There are things I don't understand about my own mind anymore, since I had to strip down and rebuild it so thoroughly. I would appreciate your help with that end of things."

Snape nodded once. "I was not there to help you with that madness," he said. "At least I can make sure that you do not suffer from it."

Harry fought down the urge to say that he wouldn't have had to rebuild at all if not for Snape's insistence on exposing his past to the world. "I'd also like access to some of your potions ingredients when I need to brew more Wolfsbane," he said. "I don't have much money left in my personal vault now, and ordering the ingredients from the apothecary would probably get the price raised, thanks to my—notoriety. Would you be willing to permit me to do that?"

"Harry!" Draco exclaimed before Snape could respond. "Why didn't you tell me that you needed money? You're more than welcome to anything the Malfoys have, you know that."

Harry could feel his face heating up. "I'm not poor, Draco," he said. "I don't need charity. Potions ingredients would serve me better than money." He looked up into Snape's face. "And I'm willing to perform chores around the lab or help him with potions, whatever he needs, in order to make up for the ingredients."

“Harry.” Snape’s voice was soft. Harry wished it wasn’t so soft. He had to close his eyes and turn his face away. “I consider you welcome to all the contents of my potions lab, as well.”

“But the ingredients for Wolfsbane are hard to replace,” Harry argued. “I’d feel better if you let me make up for them somehow.”

Snape sighed. “And if I asked you to be honest with me, and speak with me about your reaction to the trial and the charges? That is what I would want from you, Harry. I will not ask that you forgive or understand everything I have done, not immediately. But since I have unleashed these consequences, the very least I want to do is help you through the suffering of them.”

Harry swallowed. He could fool Madam Shiverwood, who didn’t know him very well. He knew he couldn’t fool Snape. If Snape asked him the right questions, he would uncover things like Harry’s carefully hidden weariness with all the volatile emotions and blame around him. It would be making himself vulnerable, and speeding up the reconciliation process that Harry wanted to take slowly.

“You need not,” said Snape. “You need not, Harry. I only asked to see if you were willing. You are still welcome in my lab and my office without that.”

Harry felt the most ridiculous urge to cry. That passed, luckily, but then came the more familiar urge to curl up and hide. He didn’t want Snape to make offers like that. It moved them into a land beyond debt and obligation and sacrifice, and all the epiphanies that Harry might have in Defense Against the Dark Arts in the course of a year would not be enough to handle it. He was used to loving other people like this, without expectation of return. To know that he was loved like that...

It made him feel vulnerable and prickly all over. He could deal with it as long as it wasn’t actually pushed into his face, but now it had been.

Draco’s arms slid around him, and that intensified the vulnerable feeling. Harry took a deep breath and managed to stand free of the

embrace and meet Snape's eyes, troubled though he was that they might look right through him.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

Snape sighed. "Harry, have you spoken to anyone but Madam Shiverwood about this?" He didn't identify this, but Harry knew what it meant well enough.

"No," said Harry. "I don't want to," he added defiantly when Snape opened his mouth. "There's enough happening that I don't think I have to. Rebuilding my mind let me accept that, yes, it was abuse, and yes, what they did to me was wrong. And now I'm reconciling with you, and that will also be a help. But most of the time, talking about it just makes me tired. And as long as I've accepted that it was abuse and it was wrong, then what—"

"So much else, Harry." Snape leaned back in his chair and kept his gaze steady. "I already know about most of it, thanks to my training you in Legilimency and having Dumbledore's memories of your training. If you do decide to confide in me, I will at least not have to ask you many questions."

Harry nodded. "Madam Shiverwood knows all about it, too," he said. "She's seen the Pensieve, and read the scrolls."

"That's good." Snape looked resigned. He knows that he can't really push, Harry thought. He knows that we aren't reconciled all the way yet, and he doesn't have the right to say these things to me. "Please, Harry," he murmured. "When you are ready to speak, then let me know."

Harry caught a frightening glimpse, then, of how much further he might have to change himself—private things about himself. He'd accepted that he'd need to change his stance in relation to others, especially the more he thought about how he hadn't recognized or respected their sacrifices enough. And specific behaviors, like not running off and endangering other people, were candidates for change, too. But altering the way he thought about specific memories...

Snape still wants to change the way I think.

Harry caught the fear before it could run away from him. He always did. You know that. You know that he's wished you thought differently about the abuse since last year. There's no reason to get upset about it now.

"If I ever change my mind, then I'll let you know, sir," he said, raising his eyes to Snape's and emphasizing his words carefully. "In the meantime, it'll be enough to spend some time brewing Wolfsbane with you, I think. Unless there is something else you would like in return?" he added hopefully.

"No, Harry."

Snape was a Legilimens, good enough to read someone's thoughts with a look into their eyes—and Harry was returning his gaze directly now. He most likely knew exactly what Harry was feeling, and yet he refused to make him more comfortable. He wouldn't let Harry retreat into a bond based on debts and sacrifices.

Perhaps, someday, I can even be grateful for that.

"All right, sir," he said, and walked towards the door. He paused to give Snape a fleeting smile. "I know that we haven't talked everything out, but I think I've said everything I'm ready to say. I understand what you did. I'm not as angry as I was. I just can't quite accept it, yet."

Snape's glance was steady. "That is more than I ever hoped for, Harry," he said.

Harry lowered his head and slipped out of the office. Draco followed close on his heels, and spoke once they were most of the way back to the Slytherin common room.

"Harry," he murmured, and then reached out, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder and tugging him to a stop. Harry turned around, and found himself engulfed in an embrace.

"Some of us do love you without any need for something in return," Draco murmured into his ear. "I'll wait until you can acknowledge that. I'll be patient. But I thought you ought to know."

Harry struggled against the urge to pull away. Some of this was a sacrifice on Draco's part, too; he'd put up with so much while waiting for Harry to struggle through abuse and forced love for his brother and other obstacles in the way. "Thank you," he said, voice strangled.

Draco sighed, just a little puff of air against his neck, but it was enough to spark a fiery chain of thought in Harry's head.

Perhaps Snape is right. Perhaps there are things I need to change, still, within myself. Harry felt an enormous weariness at the thought, the same weariness he got after he spoke with Madam Shiverwood, but he had dragged himself through worse than this. It won't be as bad as the rebuilding. And I'd much rather do this by myself than in front of anyone else. If I can cure it on my own, then no one else will have a reason to worry about me.

It would mean considering memories he'd never wanted to reconsider, tearing open wounds he'd wanted to leave closed, forcing himself through grief and worry and pain. But the only alternative appeared to be sharing that grief and worry and pain. Harry hated the very thought. He'd do this, and perhaps, in the end, he really would be the better for it, healed of some of the effects of the abuse that were probably still influencing him in subtle ways.

Free, and able to respond to what Draco and Snape and other people do for me with a lighter heart.

"Flagello!"

Harry recognized the spell the moment it was spoken. It was one he'd used to train himself when he was a child. He rolled, depending on instincts drilled into him over years, and managed to get both Draco and himself out of range of the blue pain curse as it sped down the corridor and clashed in a spate of sparks against the wall.

Harry turned, already knowing the curse had come from behind them and further up the tunnel. A girl's shape moved into view, hissing in rage, and Harry recognized Margaret Parsons, from Ravenclaw. He narrowed his eyes before he could stop himself, and tried to soothe his own anger. She must dislike him very much to have come into Slytherin territory by herself.

"Parsons," he said. "What was that?"

"I'm sick and tired of everyone pretending that they're too scared of you to strike back," said Margaret. Her hand shook as she pointed her wand at him, but Harry knew it was anger and not fear that made it tremble. "You can be taken down. You're only human, just a wizard. So what if you have Lord-level power? The weak can strike back at the strong. You showed that when you took down Headmaster Dumbledore." And now the loathing in her voice was violently painted all across her face. Harry winced at the way it distorted her features.

"Don't you read the newspapers, Parsons?" Draco was scrambling back into the fight, of course, so mad he actually was spitting as he talked. "Don't you realize what your precious Headmaster did, and ordered done, to Harry?"

"They're lies, most of them," said Margaret. "They have to be. Headmaster Dumbledore would never do something like that." Her wand had steadied now. "Tell your boyfriend to move out of the way, Potter. This is between you and me."

Harry felt a surge of frustration. He was sure that Draco would go mad in trying to protect him, not taking into account that Margaret was simply an idiot. And his own emotions were so volatile that he didn't really want to duel. Besides, whatever he did to her would just make more people look at him slant-eyed and whisper when it came out, the way that his reflecting back the hex at her in second year had.

No, wait. Defensive magic might be the best choice. I'm sure that some people will take it as an indication that I'm a coward, but I'd much rather be accused of that than bullying.

“Defigo repulsu Harry Potter et Draco Malfoy,” he said quietly, and let her hear him say it, and follow the gestures of his wand. Margaret looked astonished for half a moment, until the spell took effect, and she would feel the tingling in her body. She screamed, a wordless, incoherent sound of rage, and pointed her wand at him again.

“Flagello!”

Harry didn’t bother dodging the curse this time. It simply sizzled and went out on the end of her wand. Margaret backed up a step, fear as violent as the anger had been shading her face.

“What in Merlin’s name did you do to me, Potter?” she whispered.

“Used a reflecting spell so that you can’t use any magic on me or Draco,” said Harry calmly. “It just turns the spell back into the wand, as though it had met the countercurse on its way.” He shrugged apologetically as her fear turned back into anger. “It’s not used all that often, since it also prevents the person it’s cast on from doing anything to aid or heal the people the magic is bound against, but I thought it best. And you can look it up, Parsons. It’s not illegal or banned, or even Dark magic. You just can’t reverse it, or get anyone else to reverse it for you.”

“Why?” Margaret’s scowl was inhuman. Harry had to wonder what was making her act this way. Perhaps her parents had just raised her to worship Dumbledore.

“Because I’m too powerful,” said Harry. “And the Finite Incantatem cast on the wand would just get reflected, too. Sorry.”

Margaret whispered, “Other people are going to hear about this, Potter,” and stamped back up the hallway. Harry shook his head as he watched her go.

“Snape won’t be in bed yet,” said Draco darkly. “We can report this, and—“

“No.”

“Harry.”

It was Harry’s turn to take Draco by the arm and force him to look into his eyes. “Draco,” he said calmly. “What do you think would happen if people heard about this, from whatever whispers Margaret might make to people who already hate me? I know about the emotions twisting around the school right now. It’d start a conflagration, people for me and people against me. I’m not going to divide Hogwarts like that. I don’t think Parsons wants to, either, or she would have attacked me in front of witnesses and forced me to respond in public. If she tells the story to the teachers now, she’ll just look bad. Oh, she can prove it, sure, by showing off the curse on her wand, but she’d get in trouble. This was private revenge.”

“She attacked you, Harry!”

“Us,” Harry corrected, though he suspected the Whip Curse had indeed been aimed at him. “And I’ve handled it, Draco.”

“I don’t like this,” Draco said, his face pale and unhappy.

“Tell me,” said Harry, tilting his head, “what exactly would happen if we got Snape involved now.”

“He’d make sure that Parsons couldn’t hurt you again, and—” Draco stopped.

“However he had to,” Harry finished grimly. “Yes, I don’t entirely trust him to be rational about this. And it would still divide the school. We’re in the middle of a war, and we can’t afford that. At the very least, Slytherin can’t afford to be seen as the instigator.” He let out a soothing breath, though he wasn’t sure who it was intended to soothe, and rubbed Draco’s arm. “It’s only about two months until my parents’ trial.”

“And Dumbledore’s trial is set for March.” Draco leaned forward and stared at him. “Can you survive until then, Harry?”

"I'll just have to, won't I?" Harry shrugged, and found his thoughts once again wandering towards a spell. Could a spell be making Margaret and the others act irrational about him?

But then, why would other people, like Draco and Snape, still have compassion for me? And the most irrational behavior does seem to be confined to children from Light pureblood families, and not even all of them, or Zacharias wouldn't have become my ally. No, this is just a consequence of the frenzy the papers have put everyone in. Hopefully, by the time my parents' trial is done, they'll calm down a bit. They can't have much new to report about this.

Harry shook his head, and returned to the present. "I promise I'll be careful, Draco," he said quietly. "I hardly want to die either." He had a sudden flash of inspiration. "And I'll tell Remus. I think he'd be the person best qualified to watch out for her. He's not a teacher, so it wouldn't disrupt a class for him to scold her, and he's not a Slytherin."

Draco nodded, obviously unsatisfied but taking what he could get. Harry rolled his eyes slightly as they took their path back to the Slytherin door, careful not to let Draco see. Voldemort is hunting me, and the wizarding world eats any tidbit about me as if it were a stoat sandwich. One frustrated Ravenclaw student casting a spell at me just doesn't matter that much in the scheme of things.

Intermission: Raised in Light

Ignifer winced as her excitement from dueling the latest Vipertooth finally died down, and allowed her to feel the difference in the air between Peru and Britain. She ran a hand through her hair, tugging her head irritably back, and narrowed her eyes, trying to convince herself she was imagining it.

I am not.

There was something different about the air here. Britain always felt colder after being in South America, of course, but this wasn't that. In Peru, Ignifer had felt her head clear, and she had fallen into her old routine of sharp thoughts and quick movements. Coming back felt like stepping into a room of blankets. She felt something gently, inexorably steering her thoughts.

It was familiar. Ignifer knew she had felt it more than once. But she needed to track the sensation to a specific place, or the nagging familiarity would do her no good. Ignifer despised people who acted on faint and likely false memories, and caused irreparable damage to themselves and everyone around them. She closed her eyes, driving her mind back, whispering the old incantations that made images of flames spring up in her head and go diving into her brain, to locate specific memories. Her father would insist that those spells were only for the children of Light families, but Ignifer had not spontaneously lost the ability to use them when she Declared for Dark, nor even when he cursed her.

She walked through image after image of fire, letting the tongues of flame coil around and shape the sensation of control. Where had she sensed it? What spell did it originate from? How far did it extend? When had she felt before?

That last question was the key. Ignifer stepped out of one of the imagined hearths, and found herself in her bedroom, the neatly furnished one she'd had when she was a witch of eight. She knelt on her carpet, her eyes half-lidded and her breath passing in and out of her lungs at a regular rhythm.

Behind her stood her father, one hand resting on her shoulder and his eyes closed.

Ignifer tensed at the sight of him, but that was all she did. The days were long past when she had been unable to bear even the sight of his portrait without trying to smash it, and her strongest feeling towards him now was the same arrogant scorn he showed towards her. She watched as he bent down towards her ear—no, the ear of his still-obedient, still-young daughter—and whispered something. Ignifer stepped closer, attempting to hear what he was saying.

“Converto intellegentiam de Aurelius Gloryflower! Converto animadversionem ab intellegentia!”

Ignifer watched her younger self shudder, and then open her eyes and stare straight ahead. Her father knelt behind her, and turned her head around. Ignifer watched in silent fascination. This was not a memory she could consciously remember having, and she was not sure why. Surely it wasn’t traumatic enough that her mind would have tried to lock it away?

She remembered Aurelius Gloryflower—once the head of that illustrious Light pureblooded line, he’d quarreled with her father over the Muggleborn issue in such stupid ways that even now, when she’d shed most of her family’s prejudices, Ignifer couldn’t help despising him. She had no idea why her father would have wanted to speak a spell to her containing his name.

“Ignifer,” her father said in the memory.

Her younger self just looked at him.

“What do you feel about Aurelius Gloryflower?” her father asked.

“I don’t like him,” said the girl, and then shuddered, her face twisting violently. “I hate him,” she whispered.

Her father nodded, and smiled, and rose to his feet. “That is right. You should hate him. He is an enemy of our family.”

Ignifer's eyes widened as she took in her own expression. Had she ever really looked like that? She'd had no particular reason to do more than dislike Aurelius Gloryflower. But it seemed that at one point, she'd felt incredible, even passionate, loathing for him.

It's a result of that damned spell. He encouraged me in my hatred somehow. Ignifer opened her own eyes, not the eyes of her imagined self, and rose to her feet, frowning. That spell influences perception. It must exaggerate emotions, too. One small feeling becomes a much larger one.

More disturbing than all that, to Ignifer, was the fact that she hadn't remembered this until now. Her father had of course cast spells on her when she was younger, as many pureblood Light families did when preparing their children to endure the trials of the wizarding world, but he'd never seen a reason to hide that he was doing it. Why in the world had she forgotten this one?

Was he ashamed to admit that he needed the help, perhaps? Ignifer paced back and forth in her main room, slapping her wand into one palm. He liked convincing his family of his philosophy on his own. Maybe he didn't want me to know that he'd been reduced to using mental magic.

But he hadn't laid a Memory Charm on her, either. If he had, the simple incantations to amplify childhood memories wouldn't have managed to recover this one.

And then there was the feeling hanging in the air around her now. As though someone had cast the spell again, but with much greater reach and range, power and subtlety.

Ignifer narrowed her eyes. And it hasn't reached Peru, she thought, her conclusions flying to their targets like arrows. That's the reason the air in Britain feels differently than the air in Peru.

She wheeled and made for her owlery, where her owl, Athena, waited. She would send word and warning to her allies. She did not know who the focus of this particular spell was, but it was likely affecting all

of them. And if Harry Potter was sincere in his promises of aid to her, then she had to be sincere back.

Potter. Ignifer shook her head. The newspaper stories concerning him filled her with regular doses of rage. She had to put them down and go for long walks each time she finished reading one, or to Peru for one of her duels. The thoughts of what he had endured made her want to draw her wand, go to the Ministry, and attempt to punish his parents and the former Headmaster of Hogwarts for their actions, when they weren't making her coldly satisfied that her decision to withdraw from Light wizards was the right one.

She never had gone to the Ministry—not yet. The irrationality of her emotions frightened her and made her ashamed. She would probably be arrested if she even attempted to harm the so-called helpless prisoners, and of course Potter himself would not be pleased.

She entered the owlery and extended her hand with a little whistle. Athena took off from her perch and landed on Ignifer's arm, nestling against her with an affectionate butt of her head.

Ignifer closed her eyes. She wondered if her mother would firecall her today, as she hadn't yet, but that was a foregone conclusion. Of course she would, and try to pretend that a decade and a half of forced loathing could be cured with Ignifer simply kneeling at her father's feet.

On the other hand, if Ignifer wasn't there to receive the firecall, then her mother might think she was a coward, and Ignifer would not endure insults that were not true. She should be back in her house to open the Floo, not playing with Athena, pleasant as she found the owl's company. She sent her back to her perch with a soft compliment and a treat from one of her robe pockets.

Then she hurried back towards the house, her spine stiff and her boots hitting the ground with clacking sounds. She sucked in a deep breath of clean air to brace herself for the upcoming argument, and then paused.

Didn't I think there was something strange about the air, a moment ago? And have a memory that was connected to the sensation?

Ignifer puzzled about it, then shrugged. Obviously, if the thought had slipped her mind so easily, it was nothing really important. She would endure her mother's firecall, and then perhaps she would owl Potter, and see how well he was holding up under the constant onslaught of newspaper articles, the poor boy.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Welcome to the Real World

“...not sure he’s not a Dark Lord, anyway.”

Harry turned around as he and Draco left the Great Hall, craning his neck to listen to the two chattering Ravenclaw students. He couldn’t be sure they were talking about him, no more than the girl who spoke could be sure about the Dark Lord identity. But he was afraid they were.

You’re paranoid, he told himself sharply, and faced forward again. Everybody’s not really focusing on you and talking about you. You just think they are. And if someone does mention you, so what? Those damn newspaper articles and your teaching the dueling club are enough to keep their eyes on you.

Harry was more tired of the articles than he would care to admit. It seemed that every headline in the Daily Prophet still referred to him, and they were raking over minor details of his childhood now that Harry couldn’t think were of interest to anyone but the Wizengamot members—if them. Skeeter’s articles were probably the best of the bunch, since they did do something other than remind people that he had been abused at some point in his life, but Harry wanted all of them to just stop talking about it.

Or maybe you’re nervous because there’s a week to go until Voldemort’s attack on the equinox, and you don’t have a better plan than the one you’ve come up with, yet, he tried to reason with himself.

“It’s all right, Harry.”

Harry jumped sideways when a hand settled on his shoulder, and whipped his magic up around him. He winced when he saw the incredulous expression on Draco’s face, and shook his head, shoving his power back behind the barriers that he most often used.

“It’s all right, Harry,” Draco repeated, and then laughed a little. “Though I guess it really isn’t, if you flinch like that.” Behind the joking tone in his voice, his eyes were bright with concern, and he watched Harry with an intensity that hadn’t been there a moment before.

“Sorry,” Harry said. “I just feel like everyone’s staring at me, and I wish it would stop.”

“Harry.”

Harry started, this time because he hadn’t expected Headmistress McGonagall sweeping up to him. Her face was flushed and hectic—no surprise, really, since she carried so many burdens on her shoulders now—but she was smiling, too, and Harry felt his curiosity stir.

“What is it, Headmistress?” he asked.

“I’ve managed to divine how to reverse the Transfiguration spells on that little wooden dog you gave me, Harry,” said McGonagall, lowering her voice as a few curious students, heading in to dinner late, passed them. “I’m just about ready to bring him back. Would you like to be up in my office to meet him?”

Harry felt his worry drain away into relief, of more than one kind. Finally, finally, Regulus would be free, and Harry would get to meet him, and this was a welcome distraction from the crawling fear that filled his skin. “I would, Headmistress,” he murmured. “And could Draco come, too? Regulus should have some family there to welcome him, and I don’t know if you want to wait until I could owl Narcissa.”

McGonagall pursed her lips and looked at Draco for a long moment. Draco tried to appear ingratiating, but that had never worked on McGonagall when she was only Transfiguration Professor, and it wasn’t working now, either.

“Very well,” she said, and Harry exchanged a grin with Draco. When the Headmistress swept towards her office, they both hurried right behind her.

Harry’s heart beat erratically. Some of it was concern—the Transfiguration could still go wrong, of course, especially since they were dealing with Voldemort’s magic. Some of it was curiosity—what

would this man he had known for so long only as a voice in his head look like? And some of it was hope.

Perhaps Regulus can be an ally, someone not affected by the newspaper articles and the temptation to whisper about me. He knows everything already. No need for him to get all excited.

"The re-Transfiguration was easy enough once I started paying attention to the construction of the spells," McGonagall was saying as Harry and Draco stood in front of her desk. She placed the small wooden dog carved with Regulus's initials on the floor next to the desk. "The preservation spells weren't there to keep him from bleeding to death, and I would have seen that sooner if I hadn't been so convinced they were." She made a face to show how disgusted with herself she was, then went on. "They were to keep him looking exactly the way he did when You-Know-Who—" She took a deep breath, bit her lips, and said, "Voldemort. When Voldemort Transfigured him."

Harry, distracted from his visions of Regulus emerging from the dog, jerked his head up and stared at her. "You mean—you mean that he still looks nineteen, then?" Harry assumed that Regulus would be nineteen, at least, or perhaps twenty, given how long he had managed to stay free before the Transfiguration.

McGonagall nodded. "He hasn't aged," she said quietly. "It's one of the reasons that reversing the spells is so difficult." She closed her eyes and said, "I must have absolute quiet for this, boys."

She pointed her wand at the wooden dog, and Harry guessed that she must have uttered a nonverbal incantation. The dog shuddered, and a blue glow spread around it, a sharp, slicing color of blue that Harry had never seen before. The white outlines of letters, Regulus's initials, stood out from the dog's belly. Harry wondered if Regulus would bear them as scars when he returned, and then tried not to think that, lest even distracting thoughts keep McGonagall from doing the best she could.

"Cieo!"

Harry jumped at the sound of the Headmistress's voice, cracking down like a whip. Then he looked at her in awe. He had never heard one voice sound so—focused was the only word he could find for it. McGonagall still had her eyes tightly closed. Writhing strands of light were dancing around her, lazily forming pictures. Harry stared for a moment before realizing that the strands were all red and gold, Gryffindor colors, and that a complementary light was coming from the dog, silver and green, the colors of Slytherin.

The silver and green lights wrapped around each other, nudging slender, tapered heads like the heads of serpents together, and then abruptly struck towards McGonagall. She opened her eyes and glared at them, and they collapsed uselessly to the floor, Transfigured into ribbons without so much as a word.

The red and gold light spread down and enveloped the wooden dog, and McGonagall repeated, voice as stern as when she'd encouraged Harry to tell her about his past in second year, "Cieo. Cieo Regulus Black."

The dog was now the center of a maelstrom of light, and Harry saw other dark ropes burn into being and then vanish, seemingly consumed by the Gryffindor-colored radiance. McGonagall was reaching deep, he thought, and her magic sang with finesse, perfectly balanced and perfectly controlled. Harry was impressed. McGonagall might not be as good at Potions as Snape, or as strong as Dumbledore, but she had made Transfiguration her absolute specialty, and Harry highly doubted that either of the two wizards could have challenged her in this branch of magic.

"Transformo!" was McGonagall's next incantation, and then she murmured, gently, as if coaxing the toy to yield up the man who had occupied it for so long, "Catellus ab viro!"

The toy appeared to turn in on itself. Harry leaned forward, his hand clenching into a fist, and felt a jab of phantom pain from the imaginary left hand that he sometimes seemed to carry on the end of his stump. Draco gripped his arm as if to keep him from going closer. Harry sent him an impatient glance. He knew not to go close. He was just

bracing himself not to scream if he felt more pain of the kind with which Regulus had first introduced himself.

But no pain occurred, and the dog, lifting from the floor now and turning somersaults inside the writhing light, didn't scream. Instead, with what sounded like a cough more than anything else, it whirled and became a silhouette, and that silhouette was suddenly much larger than it had been, panting and bowing its head, with four limbs that were definitely arms and legs.

The light faded. McGonagall slumped to the side, catching herself on her desk. The signs of spell exhaustion glimmered on her face. Harry gave her a concerned glance, but couldn't quite convince himself to look away from Regulus for long.

If it was him. Quite apart from the afterimages burning in Harry's eyes, there was the fact that this man was kneeling with his head bowed, a long curtain of tangled dark hair falling over his face and concealing it.

"Regulus?" Harry whispered.

The man whipped around, moving quickly, and then halted, staring at him. "Harry?" he whispered. "Merlin, it feels so strange to see you from the outside. It's been more than a year since I have."

Harry didn't respond, because he couldn't. This man was definitely Sirius's brother, and the sight of those familiar Black features, accented and turned slightly different by the fact that they were relatives but not the same person, had stolen his breath. Harry stared into gray eyes larger than Sirius's, a nose slightly longer than his, and, of course, features younger than his had ever been in Harry's conscious memory. Regulus really was a young man of nineteen or twenty, just the way that the Headmistress had said he would be.

"It feels strange having a body back, too," Regulus commented, and patted at himself with his hands, small, fluttering motions, as though he were trying and failing to wake himself from a vivid dream.

That made Harry step forward. He might feel hesitant seeing Regulus with a memory, and his voice sounded different from the one in

Harry's head, but this was still the man who had shared his head for over a year, who had comforted him and seen his worst memories and offered Harry what help he could and told him when he was being an idiot. Harry hesitantly held out his arms.

Regulus closed his eyes, released a sigh that had more than a little relief in it, and then grabbed Harry around the waist and hauled him close for an embrace. Harry stiffened in surprise for just a moment. Then he decided that, sod it, Regulus needed the hug even if it made him uncomfortable, and let himself relax.

"It's so good to really meet you at last," Regulus whispered, finally letting Harry go and sitting back so that he could look at him. He shook his head, and smoothed Harry's hair away from the lightning bolt scar. "You need a lot more sleep than I thought you did, from the looks of your face."

Harry was not prepared to listen to silly speeches about dark circles under his eyes or the like, because a polite cough at his shoulder had reminded him that someone else was still in the room, someone who had only heard Regulus's voice in his head once or twice, during the times he was mentally connected with Harry. He pulled Draco forward. "Regulus, may I present Draco Malfoy, your—well, cousin of some degree, anyway." He didn't know the Black family tree well enough to say just how related Regulus and Draco were.

Regulus smiled and held out his hand to Draco, who was obviously drawing on polished pureblood manners as he clasped it. Harry doubted he was actually prepared to meet a cousin who had spent a good portion of his life as a wooden dog, and there was probably no pureblood ritual that covered it, either, but Draco did his best, using the greeting that would welcome back an exile. "Greetings, cousin," he said. "You have long wandered in the spaces between the stars, and we are glad to have you back in the starry spaces with us."

Regulus grinned. "No need to be that formal, cousin. I feel like I know you, too." He ruffled Draco's hair, which made Draco blink and lift one hand as if to make sure it was still there. "You've been an enormous help to Harry, and that makes you a friend in my book. Even better

than a cousin, considering what some of my cousins are,” he added darkly. Harry knew he was thinking of Bellatrix.

He rose to his feet, brushed off his clothes—which had once been Death Eater robes, Harry realized abruptly, though now they were tattered almost beyond recognition—and then turned and bowed to McGonagall.

“Headmistress,” he said softly. “I can never thank you properly for everything you’ve done for me. Please let me know if there is anything I can do. I have already determined to aid you all I can in your war to recover Hogwarts’ respectability. I have few formal duties of my own, other than protecting Harry—”

“What?” Harry asked blankly. He knows that I don’t need another guardian. At least, I thought he did. And he’s only a few years older than I am, so he’s too young to be a guardian anyway. I think.

Regulus merrily ignored him. “And I would be interested in seeing that Dumbledore’s new reputation does not damage Hogwarts unnecessarily. The happiest years of my life were spent here.” He grimaced and rubbed his left forearm. Harry found that he could just see the edge of the Dark Mark under Regulus’s sleeve. “I don’t have much political influence just at the moment, but I have the Black fortune, and the Black family estates. Please consider their aid yours.”

McGonagall nodded, a dazed expression coming over her face. Harry waited a moment to be sure that she was not going to speak, then leaned forward. The words about the Black estates had reminded him of something. “Regulus,” he said, and had the small thrill of seeing another face look back at him, rather than just hearing an answer in his own head. He suspected it would take him some time to get used to that. “Now that you’re back in your body, you should raise the wards on Wayhouse, if you can. I don’t know if they’ll listen to you, but I know that Narcissa found Bellatrix there, and if she thinks she can get in any time...”

Regulus closed his eyes. Harry felt a brief ripple of power travel over him, and then into him, as if members of the Black family had their

own private, personal web. Regulus opened his eyes, grinning. "That's so much easier and more satisfying when I have a body," he murmured. "And yes, they listened to me this time, Harry. Right now, the only people who can pass the wards into any of the houses are you, me, and Narcissa."

Harry nodded, happy that Regulus now trusted Narcissa enough to permit her free access to the Black estates; there was a time not so long ago when he hadn't. "I should owl my allies," he murmured, mind jumping to what kind of difference this might make in their plans for Voldemort's equinox attack. "They'll want to meet you, and of course, now that you're back, we know that we'll have some safe places to retreat to." He paused and eyed Regulus. "If you trust them enough to let them into the houses. I suppose that's another reason to have you meet them."

"I can already tell you that I don't trust all of them," said Regulus promptly. "But I think it's a good idea to have a meeting, Harry. Some of them might improve with a closer acquaintance. And Merlin knows, I'd like the opportunity to talk to Lucius and Narcissa again." His gray eyes gleamed. "And Severus, of course."

Harry blinked for a moment before he realized Regulus was talking about Snape. "You were both Death Eaters at the same time," he said. That's one bond that they'll share.

Regulus gave him a searching glance. "And he hasn't told you anything more than that?"

What more is there to tell? But if Snape hadn't mentioned it so far, then it probably wasn't a story that Harry was supposed to ask about. Instead, he just said, "No."

"Then I suppose I'll leave it up to him to tell you," said Regulus. "But we can also talk about guardianship for you, Harry. I don't want to force Severus to give up custody of you. He's been doing too good a job of protecting you. Since he still holds the formal legal guardianship, however, I'll need his permission to make you the Black heir. And—"

“Wait a moment.” Harry held up his hand and his stump. Regulus’s gaze darted to the stump, and his lips tightened. Harry lowered his left wrist hastily. If Regulus turns out as overprotective as Snape, then I really will have to scream. “Who said anything about your making me Black heir?”

“I did,” said Regulus. “I distinctly just heard myself say it.”

Draco snickered. Harry turned to glare at him. Draco simply grinned back. “I think I like him, Harry,” he said. “And there’s the solution to your money troubles solved, as well as another place that you could be safe when you aren’t in school.”

Harry shook his head with a scowl that he meant to take in everyone in the room, possibly including McGonagall, if she also thought this idiocy was a good idea. “Regulus, you can’t make me your heir.”

“Well, not yet,” Regulus admitted, finally showing a small sign of doubt in a thoughtful frown. “I told you, there’s Snape to agree with me first, and I’ll have to convince the Ministry I’m not dead, and that I am who I say I am—though that shouldn’t be hard, with the Black wards all responding to me—and then I’ll have to sign the papers, and we’ll have to do something about the singing creature in Grimmauld Place, so you can visit safely, and—“

“I just—there are blood heirs of the family alive,” said Harry. “What about Narcissa? What about Draco?”

“I’ll be Malfoy heir, Harry,” said Draco, who sounded like he was enjoying all of this enormously. “That’s enough for me. I never expected to get the Black estates and monies, anyway, since Cousin Sirius was still alive, even when I thought Cousin Regulus was dead.” He said “Cousin Regulus” with a sort of sadistic glee.

“I’m sure Narcissa will agree,” said Regulus, with an idle flap of his hand, as if he thought that wouldn’t be a problem. “And what Bellatrix thinks doesn’t matter anyway. I’ll set some money aside for Andromeda and her daughter, of course, but they wouldn’t want to live in Grimmauld Place or any of the other houses, anyway, not if I know Andromeda.” He smiled at Harry. “So that’s all settled.”

“Look,” said Harry, fighting down the urge to scream. Being around self-satisfied people who insisted on giving him gifts outside the boundaries of a truce-dance or other ritual was not his idea of a good time. “What if you want to get married and have children of your own, or if you adopt a magical heir? You’re still young, Regulus. You could do it.”

“Yes, but right now I don’t have anyone in mind,” said Regulus. “Stop fighting this, Harry. I made up my mind during all those days I was getting reacquainted with my preserved body and had nothing else to think about. You do best when you have some responsibility that you don’t feel you can shirk, and you need a home and a vault that can be absolutely your own.” He sneered suddenly, and Harry shivered at the way the expression looked on his face. “I don’t think that you’d really want anything your parents deigned to leave you, anyway.”

Harry waved his hand, trying to make Regulus understand what he didn’t have the words to encompass. “It’s too much. I could understand if you wanted to leave me a few artifacts, Regulus, or—” “No, even a place like Wayhouse is too much. “Or something,” he finished lamely. “But not all this.”

“And that’s your only objection?” Regulus sounded interested, but not really worried, which only irritated Harry all over again.

“Isn’t that enough?”

“No, not particularly,” said Regulus. “I can still make my will out to whoever I like. People do, you know, even when one child wants to be left out of the inheritance altogether. If I die in the War and it’s yours, then you can do whatever you like with it, Harry. I would never bind you to dispose of it in any particular way, or to keep it if it really bothered you. But I do want a responsible heir, and one I trust and want to honor, and you’re it.” Regulus grinned at him. “I assure you, the burden’s not really so heavy as you make it out to be.”

Harry just closed his eyes and shook his head, not really sure what else he could say to refuse the estates and money, and horribly tempted to just give in. At the very least, he wouldn’t have to worry

about purchasing his school supplies for the rest of the time he was at Hogwarts, or buying ingredients to brew for the Wolfsbane Potion.

And why was he struggling so much against this, anyway?

Maybe it's irrational, but it makes me uncomfortable, he thought, then opened his eyes and looked at Regulus. "I'll owl my allies," he said. "I'm not sure how long it will take them to get here." He hesitated, and looked over at McGonagall, who had recovered from the spell exhaustion and was simply watching them with a distantly amused expression on her face. "And, of course, I need the Headmistress's permission to bring them onto the grounds at all," he murmured.

McGonagall shook her head. "It's all right with me, Harry," she said. "In fact, I should attend the meeting myself, if only to represent Hogwarts."

Harry nodded, and looked back at Regulus. "I am happy that you're here," he said, feeling he needed to emphasize that. "I would be just as glad to let you keep the money and the houses, though."

"I like sharing," said Regulus.

Harry eyed him in resignation, once again hearing Draco snicker behind him. Just what I needed. Another bloody guardian. And one who maybe knows me even better than Snape does. Joy.

Harry sat bolt upright in his chair next to McGonagall's desk, aware that he probably looked as if he were going to levitate at any moment, but unable to relax. Most of his allies had answered with unexpected swiftness, and though it was now Saturday, and only two days after he had owled them, he was expecting them for a meeting in the Headmistress's office.

Regulus had spent the day before wandering around the school, talking with Snape about Merlin knew what, and Apparating to the various houses to make sure all the wards were holding. He had also apparently gone to the Ministry. That was the one journey Harry really wished he could have shared, if only to see the expressions on the

record-keepers' faces when they realized just who was standing before them.

Harry had spent the day before not relaxing. The lead article on Friday morning had been particularly inflammatory, running under a byline Harry didn't recognize, and strongly hinting that Dumbledore had been right in suspecting that Harry might become a Dark Lord. Harry had seen the stares and the scowls directed his way all morning and all afternoon. It had been enough to put him off his appetite entirely, and he had retreated to the Slytherin common room during the evening.

That was when he had realized that one of the Slytherin seventh-years was gone, and when he asked about her, everyone else averted their gazes.

She went to join Voldemort. Of course, he probably wants as many people with him as possible when he makes his attack on the equinox.

Harry hadn't slept much last night, and not due to visions. The overwhelming weight had crashed down on him, and he'd spent hours drifting in and out of various restless dozes. In his waking periods, he fought against the temptation to creep across the bedroom and wake Draco up, or to go and find Snape, or Remus. He wanted to talk to someone.

About what, though? They know everything already.

That thought had kept him just where he was, and now...now his allies were coming, and he was jumpy.

"It's all right."

Once again, Harry started violently as Draco's hand came down on his shoulder, but he didn't jump out of the chair. He forced himself to relax as Draco leaned over from the chair next to his and rubbed his back roughly.

"You'll take them all down, Harry," Draco whispered. "I know you will. You've done harder things than this, and lived through it."

Harry closed his eyes and allowed himself to lean back into that touch and those murmured words, just for a moment. Then the door to the Headmistress's office opened, and he slid smoothly down from the chair to resume his feet. It wouldn't do to be sitting when his allies entered. It was too great a sign of disrespect.

Henrietta Bulstrode, to Harry's utter unsurprise, was the first one who entered. She had a faint half-smile on her face, which only deepened when she saw Draco scrambling to mimic Harry.

"Potter," she said. "Am I to understand that we are finally plotting our first attack in this war, rather than making vague plans about the Black estates and the weapons that might or might not be lying around in them?"

"I mean to answer our enemies' attack on the equinox, yes," said Harry, with a quick inclination of his head to the people entering behind Henrietta—Ignifer, Honoria, and Mortimer Belville. "I believed it was time that we formalized our strategy."

"Such strong words," said Henrietta softly, taking the chair across from Harry's. The chairs were arranged in a semicircle facing him, but Harry realized abruptly that, like it or not, he'd set it up so that he was separated from his allies, along with Draco, McGonagall, Snape, and Regulus. Henrietta seemed to notice at the same moment, and her face brightened with amusement. "You really ought to have a gilded throne," she told him conversationally, "to complete the atmosphere."

"What a good idea," said Honoria, and waved a hand. Illusions curled around Harry's chair, turning the wood to apparent gold. Then Honoria frowned, and the gold brightened to diamond. She nodded, pleased, as banners draped the back of the chair—the crests of all the families allied with him, Harry realized with growing horror. Honoria turned a bright, expectant smile on him when she was done, waiting for praise.

Harry realized he had a few choices here. He could drop his head and flush in embarrassment, or he could make the choice that would allow his allies to respect him. He had to worry about impressing

more of them than just Henrietta. Mortimer's eyes, and those of Charles, who had just entered and made his way to the end of the row of chairs, were too sharp, too calculating.

"It still needs a cushion," he told Honoria. "Could you make one that has Voldemort's face on it?" Everyone in the room flinched, and Harry lifted his chin, with a small smile and growing confidence. "I rather enjoy the idea of sitting on him."

Honoria laughed in delight, and waved a hand. Harry glanced over his shoulder, and saw a cushion forming with an exaggerated face on it, more snake than human. It wasn't at all what Voldemort looked like, but then, he could hardly expect Honoria to know that. It was a good enough approximation.

"Thank you," he told her earnestly, and then motioned for Edward Burke and Thomas Rhagnara, both hesitating in the doorway, to come in. The Malfoys followed behind them, and then Hawthorn and Adalrico. Adalrico inclined his head when he saw Harry.

"My wife sends her apologies," he said. "Marian is sick, and she must stay home with her."

Harry frowned. "The illness isn't serious, I hope?"

"It is not, thank Merlin," said Adalrico, and Harry realized he was attempting to keep a grin off his face. "Merely a bit of accidental magic expression that wearied her and made her vulnerable to a cold." He was darting glances around the room, to see, Harry supposed, who was taking notice that his daughter could perform accidental magic so young. Harry smothered a grin, and then studied the door, knowing that more people had yet to arrive.

He was quietly satisfied when Arabella Zabini stepped into the room and sank into a full-blown curtsy. When she stood up again, the bells in her hair rang softly. Thomas was staring at her in rapt fascination, and he actually started talking before Arabella could get a word in edgewise.

"You're a Songstress, aren't you?" he asked. "How long did you train?"

Arabella gave him a cool glance, seemingly torn between pleasure that someone had recognized her and consternation that he had. "Sixteen years, in total," she said. "And I consider myself still in training. I learn something new every day."

Thomas clasped his hands together. "What a wonderful philosophy! I consider myself the same way. When I made the decision to Declare for Dark, it was the result of long years of careful consideration. When I—"

Harry cut Thomas off, regretting that his wife wasn't here to curb him. "You're most welcome here, Mrs. Zabini," he said. "I hope that you can aid us in our endeavors to counter Voldemort."

"I will most certainly try," Arabella said, and took a seat on the far end of the row, near Charles. He was staring at her, too. Harry hoped he didn't try Legilimency on her. He didn't want to have to settle disagreements like that among his allies.

Snape, Regulus, and McGonagall arrived in short order. Harry was amused to see Edward Burke lean forward the moment Regulus took his seat on the other side of Harry from Draco and eye him in slowly dawning shock. The shock turned to recognition when Harry placed a hand on his shoulder and said, "Permit me to introduce my newest ally, Regulus Black."

Surprise, shock, interest, and amusement in various degrees showed up on the faces across from him. Burke was the only one who actually dared to demand—or perhaps the only one rattled enough to demand—"How is this possible?"

"The Dark Lord Transfigured me into a wooden dog," said Regulus, sounding far more pleased with himself than Harry would have thought advisable in the circumstances. "I was bound to my brother's mind for a time, but when the Dark Lord possessed him, he knocked me loose, and I latched onto Harry, as the person in the area most strongly affected by—Voldemort's magic." He had to take a deep

breath before the name, but he said it. "I've been a voice in his head for the past year. Luckily, he finally located my body, and I've been restored to myself by the good offices of Headmistress McGonagall." He bowed to McGonagall. "And I am heir of the Black estates."

"I don't believe it." Burke's voice was quick, rapid. "Prove yourself."

Regulus grinned at him. "I filed the paperwork at the Ministry yesterday. I'm sure the story will be in the Prophet by this evening or tomorrow morning. You can read all about it there."

"That doesn't prove anything." Burke glanced around at the other allies, as though looking for support. "Why do you think Potter's trotted this impostor out?" he demanded. "To prove that he has some kind of claim to the Black estates, when everyone knows that by right of descent they should go to me."

"Not as long as I am alive, Burke," Narcissa said, in a flat, calm voice. "And after me comes my son."

"You know very well that if the Ministry officials had listened to reason half a century ago—" Burke began.

"Be that as it may," Regulus cut him off, "I'm the eldest son left alive in direct line of descent. And I've made Harry my heir."

Henrietta narrowed her eyes and gave Harry a look more calculating than ever at that. Honoria giggled and clapped her hands in delight. Most of the others again wore some expression in the middle of surprise.

Burke went mad.

Leaping to his feet, he pointed one trembling finger at Harry. "This is a lie," he breathed. "The Black estates should go to me. Everyone who actually matters knows that. I will not tolerate this—"

"Shut up, Burke," said Harry. He didn't realize how hard his voice would be until he said it. Burke stared at him in shock, and Harry went on, not daring to back off now that he'd started this, keeping his

tone low and measured. "If you cannot accept that Regulus Black is who he says he is, and the rightful heir of the Black estates, then you may leave, and consider our alliance officially broken. I see little to no value in an ally who chooses to bring up obscure legal disputes on the eve of battle, let alone one who will not listen to reasonable explanations."

Burke's face went through several different colors in the space of half a minute. Then he sank slowly back down in his chair, and stared at the floor.

"I do want to matter," he whispered. "I do want to be part of this alliance."

Harry narrowed his eyes at him. "Then control yourself," he hissed, and glanced at the others. "Does anyone else have a problem with this?"

None of them did. A strange half-smile lingered on Henrietta's face, but other than that, there was not even a halfway objectionable expression. Harry nodded, and took his chair, finally.

"Voldemort is attacking the Muggles through their underground system," he said, deciding to lay it out in blunt terms, so that no one else could raise more objections to imaginary obstacles. "He's using wooden disks to do so—disks that will crack apart the stone at the easiest points between the Muggle and the wizarding sections of the tunnels, to permit his Death Eaters entrance. I've spoken with the southern goblins, and they did agree to use their magic to protect the tunnels. But I don't know everything about Voldemort's plan, like why he's attacking Muggles in particular, and I think we should be on our guard." He hesitated, but decided that he had to reveal the next piece of information. If he didn't, then he might get some of his allies killed. "I've also heard, though not confirmed as yet, that Voldemort is attacking Muggleborn children who are too young to attend Hogwarts. He got their names thanks to Mulciber entering the school last year. He can drain their magic and make his own stronger."

"No, he can't," said Mortimer, rather pompously. "There were no reports of that during the First War."

"How would you know?" Charles asked, his voice soft and dangerous. "You weren't in the country at the time."

Mortimer flushed, and Harry decided that it was time to intervene again. "His draining ability has grown stronger since his resurrection," he said. "As I said, I haven't been able to confirm this as yet, but it could mean that he'll be considerably stronger than we ever expected. Retreat, if he's there. Leave him up to me."

"Potter."

Harry glanced questioningly at Ignifer, who was leaning forward. "Why are you so confident that you can handle him?" she demanded. "We're your allies. Let us help you."

Harry sighed. He would have to bring this up, too, it seemed. "I can do the same thing, if need be," he said. "I've swallowed some of his magic in the past, and made it part of my own."

"Then you could take power in the same way," said Mortimer. "Find a few willing volunteers of your own. Problem solved."

Harry saw his older allies—the Malfoys, Hawthorn, Adalrico—shake their heads sadly. Harry tried as best he could to keep his temper while answering. Mortimer was valuable mostly as a contact point among other families, Narcissa had told him, since he was the heir of an important pureblood line, for though he was. That meant Harry had to treat him well. It didn't mean that he had to have any real respect for his intelligence, only seem as if he had. "I would rather not do that. No wizard or witch would like having his or her magic drained, and I don't think as many would be willing to become volunteers as you think."

"If it's for the good of the wizarding world, they should," said Mortimer.

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Are you volunteering?"

Mortimer recoiled. "I am a pureblood heir," he spluttered. "I was thinking—Muggleborns or something." He waved a hand. "Someone who doesn't matter all that much to the future of our world."

"I don't see a difference between Muggleborns and purebloods," said Harry mildly. He was aware of several of his allies' gazes sharpening. He did not care. He would make this clear, too. In a way, he found it hard to imagine that they hadn't already known it. "I would take magic only from someone like Voldemort who's proven himself all but irredeemable, or from someone who willingly offered it to me. I've only ever used my draining ability to defend myself. It will stay that way."

A silence succeeded his words. Then Ignifer asked, "So what exactly do you want us to do, Potter?"

Harry let out a small sigh. No open complaints. That's progress, of a sort. "Work with me," he said. "We need to set up a strategy to confine the Death Eaters if they do break through. I need to know more about what each of you can do, beyond the obvious, to know where best to put you."

Ignifer volunteered first, as Harry had suspected she would. "I am best with fire magic," she said softly. "I can call flame hot enough to burn stone, if that's necessary."

"I'd like to have you at one of the entrances to the London Underground, then," Harry told her. "If worst comes to worst, we might need you to bring one of the tunnels down on the Death Eaters' heads. Do you have any objection to working with goblins?"

Ignifer shook her head. Harry nodded back. "I'll owl the hanarz and ask her to fix you a position, then."

"Illusions are my strength," said Honoria. "And I can—well, I can pass very quickly between point and point, if that's what you need someone to do." She looked pleased with herself, and disinclined to reveal what about her might permit her to do that.

Harry glanced at Snape, whose eyes were narrowed. Snape gave him a barely perceptible nod. He'd used enough Legilimency to see that Honoria wasn't lying or exaggerating, then.

"You're messenger," Harry told her, and Honoria squeaked as if that pleased her. "Secondary line of defense." He turned expectantly to the others.

Slowly, he worked out where they would be best placed. Most of them would be best guarding the critical junction points in the tunnels, Harry decided. The biggest problem was that they had no idea how many points Voldemort might strike at, and he would certainly have more Death Eaters than Harry had defenders. So they would keep their strategy light and fast-moving, with everyone ready to retreat and call on the goblins for help if too many Death Eaters managed to break through, and they would stay connected by means of Honoria and a messenger spell that Lucius quietly offered to teach everyone else. Regulus and Snape would act as guards for Harry. Harry wasn't happy about that part of it, but had the sense to keep his objections quiet, since he knew neither Regulus nor Snape would be moved.

Regulus was grinning by the time they were done, his gray eyes sparkling in a way that reminded Harry painfully of Sirius's. "I have some toys at home that might just help," he mused.

Harry could feel himself relaxing, just a bit, as the realization that they had a strategy pushed into him. It still wasn't perfect. Voldemort would still be hard to defeat. But Harry thought now, with some hope, of everyone actually managing to survive the equinox, and the Muggles being safe.

If everyone just does as we hope they will do. If we can manage to hold this together.

"Oh, by the way, Harry," Regulus told him casually, as the rest of his allies were filing out the door, "I thought you should know that Severus agreed to let you become my heir."

Harry shot Snape a betrayed look, and got a flat glare in retaliation, which promised detention if he opened his mouth. Harry huffed, and

kept quiet, but he was already thinking up ways to convince Regulus otherwise.

It's one thing for me to have guards in the middle of battle. I'm probably Voldemort's primary target, by now. But for Merlin's sake, Regulus needs to get over this silly idea. He could still meet someone whom he wants to marry, or a child he wants to adopt.

I was right. It is like having two guardians, and neither one of them listens to me.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Up From Beneath

The first thing Harry noticed when he woke on the morning of the autumnal equinox was that Argutus was blue.

He blinked and reached for his glasses, slipping them on before he looked again. But no, his eyes had not deceived him. The little Omen snake was swarming with blue, color that bent and rippled and ran over his scales with his movement, as though he were a moving mirror pointed at an ocean scene.

Harry murmured, "Why do you look like that?"

Argutus woke and tilted his head to look down at his body. "I must be foretelling a vision of the future," he said, sounding pleased with himself. "I don't know what it means yet. I think I will in a few months. Do you know what it means?" He nudged Harry's hand with an affectionate push of his neck.

Harry tried to pick him up, but Argutus slithered free easily and waited until Harry lowered his left arm and let him crawl up it. "No," he said. "And do you mean that you'll know what this glimpse of the future means in a few months, or how to sense what a vision means then?"

"What a vision means." Argutus wriggled and got comfortable on Harry's shoulder as Harry went towards the loo. He liked the sensation of hot water cascading over his scales, and would not listen when Harry told him that he was a decadent little snake. "I can almost grasp the meaning right now, but it's floating just out of reach. I am only a young Omen snake as yet. Give me time."

Young, but curious and arrogant as hell, Harry thought, with a shake of his head. Argutus regularly left his shoulder now to slither around the school and "investigate" what other people were doing. Since he couldn't understand English, he came back with all kinds of wild and preposterous tales. If Harry could believe Argutus, half the school was plotting against him, and every spell was practiced for the sole purpose of either affecting Harry somehow or affecting an innocent Omen snake who was only trying to find interesting things to see.

He dwelt on the thoughts as long as he could. They were amusing, and they might help to keep his mind away from the battle that would be rising soon.

Any moment, he kept expecting a letter from Madam Marchbanks or the hanarz telling him that the attack had begun, but he got through breakfast—and another inflammatory article from the reporter he didn't recognize, this time hinting that Harry had used Dark magic on his parents—without one arriving. Now they were in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Acies was having them write down all the definitions of Dark they knew so far. She'd given no reason for it.

Well, I know the reason, Harry thought, as he finished his list and racked his brain for one more possibility. She'll probably tell us how inadequate they are in a moment.

Wildness, solitary magic, compulsion, deception...those were the four definitions of Dark magic he knew, and everything else he'd come up with was a variation on those. Harry frowned at his parchment, and hoped against hope that his brain might conjure more if he just concentrated.

Halfway through a period of intense concentration, he realized that he was reviewing the battle plans in his head, and gave up with a little sigh. Pansy glanced quickly at him, then looked away, as though trying to pretend that he wasn't of interest to her. Harry sat back and thought about the plans one more time.

Snape and Regulus, who was due in an hour, would remain in the school with him until the attack actually began, and then go with him to the battlefield—or battle tunnel, as Harry supposed it might more properly be called. Honoria was acting as messenger. Most of his allies, the ones without Dark Marks on their arms, were holding positions in the junctions between the Muggle world and the wizarding one. Lucius, Hawthorn, and Adalrico had chosen those wizarding tunnels most likely to be attacked, and were well away from the hanarz's chains, which would otherwise strike at them.

He wasn't forgetting anything. That was what they had planned. No one had sent him a letter saying that he couldn't do his part. Harry

had discreetly warned the Ministry, through Madam Marchbanks, that something momentous might happen today. He didn't dare be too open, with any of his Light allies. The balance between them and his Dark allies was shaky, the more so with all the opposition stirring against Harry among the Light purebloods. Besides, many in the Ministry would go slightly mad if they knew the southern goblins were free to make their own decisions about protecting the tunnels under Muggle London like that.

"Read me your list, Miss Bulstrode."

Harry sat up, blinking, and flushing a bit as Acies's dangerous eyes passed across his face and he realized that she had surely noticed his distraction. That's the bad thing about having a professor with a mind that's partially a dragon's. You can't fool her.

Millicent cleared her throat and began to read. If she had been at all startled by their professor's abrupt demand, she hid it well. "Dark is often wildness," she said. "Examples are the magic that appears on Walpurgis Night, the magic in birthing rituals, and the use of Dark creatures like dragons. At the same time, Dark Arts often rely on compulsion. Webs, for example." There was probably no force on earth that could have kept her from winking at Harry at that point, and Harry didn't try to stop her. "These forces are usually seen as coming together in the wildness of the caster's will. They restrain others so that they may be free and unrestrained themselves."

"Very good, Miss Bulstrode," said Acies softly. "Three points to Slytherin. And do any of you know how the spells often considered Dark Arts—the Unforgivable Curses, for example—fit in with these definitions?"

There were a few shrugs and mutters. Harry cocked his head in curiosity. Remus had been the first Defense professor to teach them some of the theory behind Dark Arts, and of course the disguised Mulciber had shown them the Unforgivable Curses, but Harry hadn't known that the theory could account for specific spells so well. He'd got used to wielding what magic needed to be wielded, and then working out the theoretical ramifications of what he'd done later.

“Dark Arts represent a partial sacrifice of will,” said Acies. “Many wizards and witches are safe even with those spells called evil if they do not surrender their whole wills, if they remember that the use of some curses may mean time in Azkaban or the death and ruin of people they love. But when they give themselves up completely, trade free will for wildness, then they are likely to cast a Crucio where a far milder pain spell would do instead.”

She swept her head around to stare at the rest of the class. “When we begin practicing with Dark Arts, I will expect you to keep this in mind. Retain your free will, always. No amount of power can make up for its sacrifice.”

“Professor Merryweather,” said Susan Bones, her voice both fascinated and horrified. “Are you saying that—that Dark Arts are all right as long as we don’t lose ourselves completely?”

“I am considering them from the perspective of the wielder, Miss Bones,” said Acies, implacably. “From the perspective of the victim, they are of course different. But it seems that you are considering that a pain curse must be a Dark Arts spell. Does that include Anapneo?”

Susan frowned. “But that just helps someone who’s choking. It’s not a pain curse!”

“Yes, it is,” said Acies. “It causes pain.”

“That’s different from something like Crucio,” Susan argued.

“Three points to Hufflepuff,” Acies said. “You are distinguishing among them already. That is an integral part of Defense Against the Dark Arts, the inner defense and ability to think rationally about spells, no matter their effects. Another way to sacrifice free will is to give in to fear.” Harry told himself that Acies wasn’t looking significantly in Margaret’s direction, that he’d just imagined it. “When one begins to scream in fear of Dark Arts, one has surrendered and made a whole sacrifice where a partial one—that of caution—is required.”

Harry heard Margaret make a rude sound under her breath, but he didn’t get to hear more than that as his scar erupted in pain.

Even as he went to one knee, seeing Millicent reach out towards him and Pansy make an aborted movement, Harry remained calm. I expected this. This is probably the first sign of the attack. Voldemort is so excited that he can't control his glee any more, and the link between us is open.

He quickly realized he was mistaken when he opened his eyes again and saw, not the Defense classroom, but a misty dreamworld, like the vision he'd had of the Weasley house when Voldemort attacked it. He stood up quickly, and stared in several directions. He was on a beach, near the rolling sea.

He recognized it—the beach in Northumberland where Death Eaters had attacked him, where he had run with unicorns, where he and his father and Connor had celebrated Midsummer.

“Potter,” said Voldemort from behind him, his voice laced with self-satisfaction. “I had looked forward to meeting you here. But I see that you have guessed wrong. How disappointing. Up from beneath, Harry. Any moment now, the Muggles will hear the singing come from their river.”

The pain in his scar grew intense then, and the dreamworld broke apart around him. Harry came to on the floor, with Millicent and Acies bending over him, sheltering him from the too-curious gazes of his other classmates.

Harry lay paralyzed for a moment, trying to work out what Voldemort meant, why the hell he would be on a beach instead of in London, why he would be talking about singing, of all things—

And then Argutus crawled towards his face, hissing in concern, and Harry caught another glimpse of his blue and shifting scales.

The color of water reflecting the sky.

An attack by water. Not the tunnels.

Singing.

The sirens Voldemort freed!

Harry, gasping, felt his mind leap over several steps to arrive at the logical conclusion. He'd heard the words "up from beneath" in his vision of Voldemort, and simply assumed that they meant an attack through tunnels. He'd had no real proof that they did. And Bellatrix had been speaking of telling their allies about the attack, allies to whom Voldemort had promised the aid of the basilisks, but only if they needed it.

I was a fool, Harry thought grimly, his new crystalline thoughts unfurling quickly. And "their river." Voldemort's sending the sirens up the Thames.

Harry let his magic flood through him, dimming the pain and raising him to his feet so quickly that both Millicent and Acies had to scramble out of the way. His mind was still racing, and he didn't immediately move, other than to wipe away the blood pouring from his scar, because it was getting in his way.

Those wooden disks he used—perhaps the tangle of lines on them represented rivers, after all, and not tunnels. That doesn't tell me where he is, though, does it? He could be anywhere in London. He might be somewhere else entirely, contacting and controlling the sirens by means of those disks, and I won't know. So what's the best course to find him?

A Death Eater can Apparate to his side.

Harry started out of the Defense classroom, with the intent of finding Snape. Plans raced around his head and chattered a mile a minute. He knew what he would do the moment he found Snape, and he knew what weapons he would fetch from the trunk in his room, and he knew which of his allies he would try to contact—the only ones whom he had the means to contact.

"Harry."

He blinked and turned around. It was so hard to remember that Millicent might be concerned for him. The knowledge that he had been wrong, his allies all in place to counteract a plan that Voldemort had no intention of using, seemed to have moved him into a different world, and if she had something useful to say, then she should say it and be done. Harry stared at Millicent, and she looked quickly away from him, as though his eyes frightened her.

“Good luck,” she said softly.

Harry nodded once, and then sprinted out of the Defense classroom, heading for the dungeons. His mind dragged up information he had noted but not thought of consciously until now, when it might prove useful. Snape’s teaching Potions right now. The classroom, not his office.

He ran. He had not used his training in sheer speed very often lately, but he hadn’t let himself go, either. He knew the best way of taking stairs, of sliding quickly around corners with an eye as to whether anyone was coming towards him or not, and how to let himself fall and roll when it was the best way to get somewhere quickly. He was at the door of the Potions classroom before he had known he could be.

Before he could knock, someone grabbed his shoulder, and he whipped around, though his magic didn’t rise in defense. The touch of the hand was too familiar for that.

It was Connor, grimacing and touching his forehead. “I felt him,” he said quietly. “He’s happy, isn’t he? And I know that he was talking to you. I figured you’d go to Snape.”

Harry considered Connor for a single rapid moment. His brother had never fought, not in a proper battle, and it might be suicide to take him along.

On the other hand, Connor’s jaw was set, indicating he wasn’t going anywhere, and there was the chance, if only a chance, that his compulsion gift could be useful in reversing the sirens’ voices.

“He’s attacking with the sirens,” said Harry. “Not in the tunnels, the way I thought.” He put his shoulder to the door of the Potions classroom and banged it open, interrupting Snape in mid-speech.

Snape caught his eye and didn’t waste his breath on anything as trivial as a scolding for the interruption, instead taking several long steps forward. Harry met him next to a table full of wide-eyed third-year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, and motioned curtly with his head for him to bend down. Some guardian part of his mind had warned him that it would be for the best if everyone around them didn’t have the idea that Snape carried the Dark Mark on his forearm. It was known, of course, but students this young didn’t need the reminder.

“Voldemort’s attacking London, but with the sirens, not up the tunnels,” said Harry. “I need you to Apparate me to him, following your brand. I’ll fetch a few things, and then we’ll go.”

Snape did not argue. Rather, he turned to his class, snapped, “Write me a foot-long essay on the properties of Calming Potions, due tomorrow,” and then followed Harry out of the classroom. Harry lengthened his steps the moment they were out of sight of the silent and staring third-years. The common room was his goal now, and the gifts his allies had given him which might help in battle. He had the means to summon at least two of his allies from their mistaken positions in London, and they could tell the others. Harry only hoped that they would be willing to follow the sudden change in plans, as well as willing to let former Death Eaters Side-Along Apparate them.

“How did you find out about this?” Snape demanded behind him.

“He contacted me in the middle of Defense,” said Harry, and wiped at another stubborn blob of blood creeping down his face. Damn scar. It’s rather annoying. “Just had to laugh and brag about his victory, I suppose, and not seeing me there.”

That was something else Harry hadn’t considered.

He expected to see me there. He expected me to have figured out his plan.

There was proof positive that he suspected Harry was spying on him in his visions. Harry grimaced in resignation. I can't trust the scar link to give me reliable information on his movements anymore.

I suppose that I'll just have to take on the war on the offensive, then. Well, let's. You won't know what bit you, Tom.

They reached the door of the Slytherin common room, and Harry snapped, "Pureblood dignity," making it slide back. A few students with free periods, lounging about the place, stared at him as he walked past. Their stares only intensified when their Head of House and a Gryffindor followed.

Harry ignored them. It was hardly a secret that Snape opposed Voldemort anymore, not when he'd openly attacked Bellatrix at the end of third year. He was more concerned right now in running over the things he could take with him to the battle. Any slim advantage he had over Voldemort right now would be helpful.

He walked over to his trunk the moment he entered his room. Fawkes, sitting on his bed, opened one eye and gave a sleepy chirp, and then sat up again and chirped more forcefully when he saw Harry kneel down and start rifling through his belongings.

Out came Honoria's whistle, which Harry hung around his neck, and the dragon scale Ignifer had given him. Harry hesitated, thought about waving it right now to summon her, and then shook his head and stuck it in his pocket. If he waved it now, she couldn't come to him anyway through Hogwarts's anti-Apparition wards. Better to do it once he reached the scene of the battle, and then there would be a person beyond the former Death Eaters who knew where to find him.

He drew out the flowering vine that Hawthorn had given him for Christmas last year, and leaned towards one of the blossoms. He had to hope it would work when she wasn't at home, but crouched in one of the tunnels beneath London, getting ready to deflect an attack she thought was coming at any second.

"Hawthorn?" he asked.

He heard a startled breath, but though he stared hard into the flower, he couldn't see anything. Well, she had only told him it would transmit voices, and she presumably knew her own enchantment. Hawthorn responded a moment later, her voice intense. "Harry? You're using the vine I gave you?"

"Yes," said Harry, as he sorted through other items in his trunk, using his stump to move them and his hand to actually pick them up. Alliance compass—I don't need it, but Connor might, if he gets separated from the others in the battle and needs to know which direction to head in. He tossed the compass to his brother, who caught it, looking startled. Books, robes, maps, no, no, no—ah, the knife that Adalrico gave me! Harry hung that at his belt as he continued talking to Hawthorn. "Plan's changed. Voldemort's not attacking the tunnels. He's sending sirens up the Thames, and maybe other rivers, to sing at the Muggles. I don't know where he is, but you can find him through your Dark Mark, can't you? I need you to alert the others, and Apparate the ones who have no Mark to the site of the battle."

No complaints, no hesitation, no remarks about Hawthorn standing a good chance of being killed if she went into a nest of Death Eaters. She said only, "Of course, Harry," and then there came the sound of quick footsteps on stone, an odd thing to hear through the blossoms of a plant.

"Thank you," Harry said, not knowing if she heard him or not, and then put the vine aside and scanned the rest of his trunk. The glass serpent caught his eye, glowing almost completely blue, and he scooped that out and into his pocket. A good thing to have an emergency Portkey around, whether it was for him or someone else. He was sure it would work to transport someone else to Malfoy Manor, since it had worked for Vince.

Draco.

Harry hesitated. He knew that Draco had Ancient Runes right now. The classroom wasn't that far away, and since Harry had no idea if the attack had already begun or not, and was doing his best not to act

like an idiot and dash into things, he knew he had the time to take him along.

Do I want to? He would be going into danger—

Then Harry shook his head, remembering the conversation he'd had with Draco last year on the day he freed the unicorns and Draco made him understand exactly what his love felt like. No. I told him I would never make him wait behind like some soldier's spouse who couldn't fight. He can fight, and he would want to come with me. At the very least, I've got to offer him the choice.

He slid to his feet, closed the trunk, and glanced down at Argutus. "Do you want to stay here?"

"No! This is interesting." The little Omen snake sounded rapturous. Harry shook his head and held his arm up for Fawkes, who flew to his shoulder.

"We're stopping by the Ancient Runes classroom to fetch Draco," he said. "And then we need to go briefly into the Forbidden Forest."

"Do we have time?" Connor demanded, his eyes flaring with a courage that struck Harry as inescapably Gryffindor. "There could be innocent people dying right now."

"There could be," said Harry steadily, hoping that his brother paid attention to his words and not the death glare Snape was throwing him. "But I don't know that, and I'd rather not rush into this. I don't even know where Voldemort is, not for certain. We've got to go, yes, but we have some time."

"Harry is correct," said Snape, in his softest voice. "I, for one, would rather see him take care with his safety than rush blindly into things on the mere hope that he could save someone's life."

Harry arched his eyebrows at him. "See? I do learn," he said, and then he was out of the room, running across the Slytherin common room, then towards the stairs out of the dungeons and up to the Ancient Runes class. Plans were still running around his mind,

chattering at him, but some of them would necessarily be held in abeyance until he saw what the battlefield looked like.

He didn't bother begging the professor's pardon when he finally stepped into the middle of Ancient Runes, just locked eyes with Draco, who was sitting across the classroom in a straight line from the door, and said, "We're going to do battle with the Dark Lord. Are you coming?"

Draco blinked once, such a hard blink that it seemed to clear out most of his surprise. Then he nodded, stood, and scooped up his wand from his bag, following Harry out. Harry waited for him to come up and stand at his right shoulder, unable to express the satisfaction he felt in mere words.

He did give Draco one fierce smile, which Draco returned with interest. Then they were off again, and Harry felt the smile drop from his face as he raced through calculations of time and distance, and concluded that they had a few minutes to spare. He would ask for aid, but if the question couldn't travel fast enough through the Forbidden Forest, then they would have to depart.

Fawkes sat up on his shoulder and gave a deep warble. Harry smiled at him.

"Can you tell the Many that I'd like their help?" he asked.

Fawkes uttered a resigned sound at having to deal with snakes, and then rose and vanished in a ball of flame. Harry focused on reaching the doors out of the school, his mind throwing possibilities at him.

What happens if Voldemort's in London? Then we battle him in front of a bunch of Muggles, I suppose, and it's work for the Obliviators later. I'd still rather use magic in front of Muggles than sacrifice their lives.

What happens if he's somewhere else? It should be near water. We'll have to depend on our magic, and hope that he doesn't have a large number of Death Eaters with him.

What happens if Draco or Connor gets hurt?

Harry narrowed his eyes. Then Voldemort, or whatever Death Eater did it, gets to know what pain feels like.

Can we count on any other aid from magical creatures? No, I don't think so. I know I can transport the Many, but I couldn't take more than a few Runespoors, and the centaurs are too big for us to Apparate. The unicorns might aid us, I suppose, but that's entirely their own affair, and we can't count on it.

Do we have a way to contact Regulus? I guess we can hope he feels something strange through the Dark Mark and comes to us, but we can't count on that, either. I should have thought of firecalling him while I was in the school, but I didn't, and it would have meant a side trip, anyway. If we all survive this, then I'll make sure we have some faster way of contacting each other. A mirror might do the trick.

Harry was a bit surprised that he hadn't tried this method of planning before he leaped before. It wasn't really simple, but it worked. Of course, it was probably only working because he had no idea if Voldemort was already snaring and torturing innocent Muggles or not.

And why is he attacking Muggles anyway? What does he want from them?

It doesn't really matter, I suppose. Nothing good.

They reached the edge of the Forbidden Forest, in time to meet a proud Fawkes and a writhing tangle of the Many. Harry knelt down, thinking just in time to pull Argutus into the collar of his robes.

The tiny green-gold cobras poured up his body and coiled around his legs, his chest, his neck, and his face, hissing greetings all the while. One of them hung around Harry's throat, ignoring Argutus as if he were a piece of string, and said, "We have come, because you helped free us from the web that would have taken us. It took you a long time to decide that you wanted repayment for that debt."

“Well, I want it now,” said Harry simply, and then glanced up at Snape to make sure that he was speaking English. “Do you think that you can Apparate me with the snakes clinging to me?”

Snape nodded, and then looked at Draco and Connor, who wore identical mutinous expressions. “I will come back for you,” he said. “Do not try to follow, or what you receive from me will make being splinched look amusing.”

Connor cowered. Draco just glared at him, a steady look that said Snape had better come back.

Harry shook his head and turned away again, this time heading for Hogsmeade and the edge of the wards around the school. The shape of the Portkey in his pocket bumped and jostled, and so did the unfamiliar weight of the blade at his belt and the whistle around his neck, which the Many were curiously twining around. I hope these will be useful after all.

They reached the edge of the wards. Harry glanced once at Snape, who seized his left arm with his right hand. He shook his own left sleeve, and his Dark Mark came free, gleaming black.

“Can you still Apparate to him even though he hasn’t summoned you?” Harry asked, abruptly realizing that there might be a flaw in his plan.

“We can find him, if we concentrate,” said Snape quietly. “It is not widely-known, but we may go to him even when he does not summon us, if we are willing to expend the necessary magic.” He narrowed his eyes. “He may be actively keeping me away, of course, and then this will not work, but I do not think so. He wants you there, Harry.”

His eyes conveyed a different message. Endanger your own life on purpose, and you will have to deal with me.

Harry nodded, in response to both messages, and then leaned close to Snape. The Many and Argutus both hissed encouragement. Harry saw Snape close his eyes, and his face became pale and strained.

The snake on his arm, black and slickly gleaming, unwound from the skull, and conducted an obscene little dance towards Snape's elbow. Harry stared, and then the world around them vanished and whirled around and squeezed him through a tight tunnel, and he was landing on sand and heard the roar of the surf in the background.

He wasn't that surprised to find himself on the Northumberland beach. He grimaced. Bastard. Probably chose the place on purpose, hoping to throw me off balance.

Harry didn't feel thrown off balance. He felt focused, sharp, his mind clear and rich with purpose. He answered the squeeze of Snape's hand on his shoulder with a quick nod, and then turned around, looking for Voldemort, even as he drew Ignifer's dragon scale from his pocket and gave it a quick wave.

He caught the sensation of familiar magic, a powerful glamour, and stared at it. His own power went to work, wearing it away. When it fell, he could see Voldemort standing with a circle of wooden disks spread around him, one hand extended and a low humming noise rising from his throat, or perhaps his robes. The purple shapes of two basilisks coiled at his feet. Behind him crouched two naked Death Eaters, one man and one woman. Harry opened his mouth in a snarl. Greyback and Whitecheek.

Voldemort looked at him, and smiled.

And then his magic rose and unfolded around him.

He had been feeding on Muggleborn children, Harry knew at once, or at least on someone. The feeling of dark, vicious magic that rose from him like greasy smoke was immeasurably stronger than it had been at the Burrow, perhaps twice as powerful. Harry knew it when the magic turned, coiling like one of the basilisks, and then shot straight at them.

At him, and at Snape, who still had not Disapparated.

"Go!" Harry screamed, and then reached out and poured his will into the goal of getting Snape to go back to Hogwarts for Draco and

Connor, the way he had once forced Evan Rosier to go back to his lord. He heard the crack of Snape vanishing, and had a moment to feel satisfied.

Then Voldemort's magic struck him like a whale's back.

Harry went sprawling, and found he couldn't get a breath. The magic held him down, lying on top of him, squeezing every bit of air out of his lungs, flowing and overflowing and draping and slamming down. There was more, always more, and Voldemort pinned him and yet had the power to do whatever spell to command the sirens he was pouring through the wooden disks.

"You thought you could challenge me, Harry," Harry heard Voldemort whisper, beyond the ringing in his ears and the blackness teasing at his vision from the lack of breath. "How wrong you were, how wrong all the challengers to Lord Voldemort's power always are."

"Flagellum Ardoris!"

Harry heard a scream, smelled smoke, saw a burst of light. Then the pressure on him eased, enough that he could draw in a breath. Air had never tasted so sweet. He rolled over and drew his own magic up, weaving linked Shield Charms around himself, so that he wouldn't get taken by such surprise again.

When he turned his head, he saw Ignifer Apollonis dancing around Voldemort's circle of wooden disks, igniting one after another. In her hand was a whip of flame, glowing red and orange and gold, and white where it ran into her clenched fist, and cracking down with enormous force at the slightest twist of her arm. Everywhere it touched, it burned, and already four or five of the disks were gone.

She saved my life.

And Voldemort was about to take hers, now that he was past the shock of surprise and drawing back his magic for another strike. He had his wand leveled, Harry saw. He could and would cast a Killing Curse without hesitation.

Harry focused on Voldemort's wand and thought, Expelliarmus!

It probably only worked because Voldemort hadn't been expecting an attack from that angle, but Harry didn't care. The yew wand still soared from Voldemort's hand to his. Harry quickly threw it down on the sand behind him and took a step backwards, trying to snap it in half. It resisted the weight of his foot, though. Voldemort had probably enchanted it to protect itself against such a simple tactic. Pity.

"What shall we do?"

Harry started. He'd forgotten about the Many, involved in the battle as he was. "Attack the large snakes and the ones in the circle who smell like wolves," he said. "Bite them, spit into their eyes, do whatever you can to make sure that they don't interfere."

He heard the cracks of Apparition as more people arrived—allies or Death Eaters, he couldn't tell. The Many left his body in a glorious wave, pouring directly towards the circle. Voldemort was hissing to the basilisks now, commanding them to the attack, and Harry could only hope the hive cobras would survive. They had one enormous advantage: their mind was collective, and could move to any body in the hive at an instant's notice, which meant the basilisks would have to kill them all to actually defeat them.

Harry felt a weight against his shoulder, and Draco whispered, "I'm here. What should I do?"

"Cover your ears," Harry suggested, and blew Honoria's whistle.

Someone roared with laughter behind him. Harry turned to see Karkaroff sagging, his arms wrapped around his belly as he tried, gamely, to stifle his laughter and take a few more steps forward. Behind him were other Death Eaters, though it looked as though Hawthorn and at least one of his allies were hastening over the small hills and down to the beach.

The basilisks were engaged with the Many, and Greyback and Whitecheek were among the whistle's victims.

But Voldemort was free to pay attention to other things now, and his gaze locked with Harry's.

Harry felt his scar blaze into life. He gritted his teeth and moved forward, trying to retain the clear head that had brought him here. Voldemort was working some sort of spell with the wooden disks. Harry thought it was to control the sirens, though he had only his guess. That meant the disks had to be destroyed. Of course, Voldemort's magic was coiling protectively around them now, making that easier said than done.

Needs must, Harry thought, reluctantly, and began to siphon Voldemort's magic.

Voldemort realized what was happening at once, of course, but the moment he moved to defend himself, Harry flicked his gaze to one of the disks that Ignifer—helpless with laughter, just like the rest of them—hadn't managed to destroy, and thought, Reducto!

The disk blasted apart. Voldemort narrowed his eyes, and the pain in Harry's scar increased until he sagged to his knees. He felt Draco put his arms around him from behind, and leaned back into that comforting embrace, even as his body flooded with foul, tainted power.

Harry hated the feeling of it. He was drowning in slime and ashes, and he couldn't imagine making that magic part of himself. But he knew that he had to keep on drawing it. Voldemort was too strong. In a moment, he'd come up with some way to both defend the circle of disks and fight Harry, and then the battle would turn in the Death Eaters' favor.

The relentless roar and hiss of the waves surged up in Harry's mind between the silence of one thought and the next, giving him his answer.

He took a deep breath and opened himself wide, the jaws of the snake inside him stretching and stretching. He dropped all the other magic, even the Shield Charms he'd strung around himself.

Voldemort could have taken him in that moment, if he'd reacted fast enough.

He didn't. Harry seized his magic instead, and opened the siphon at the other end, pulling Voldemort's power from him and dumping it directly into the sea.

In moments, the feeling of slime and ashes diminished, and so did the sensation that the magic he'd swallowed was about to get out of control. Harry was vaguely aware of figures fighting around him—someone must have worked a Finite Incantatem to end the spell of Honoria's whistle—but he was much more interested in draining all of Voldemort's magic that he could.

Voldemort started to reach for Harry's own power, and then hesitated, obviously worried about the safety of the disks. Harry made him pay dearly for that moment, ripping into his core, digging into the magic that Voldemort had been born with, and tearing part of it away.

His enemy roared.

And the pain in Harry's scar increased until it became the world.

Sand and sea and Draco's arms and the pale, red-eyed face in front of him vanished. Harry knew that, yes, this was worse than the pain he'd endured when Bellatrix cut off his hand, and still he kept swallowing. He didn't think he could stop at this point, or close the siphon—one end in him, the other in the ocean, the one pulling, the other dumping.

"Reducto!"

Merlin only knew how that spell got through to him, when nothing else had, but it might have had something to do with Voldemort's attention turning elsewhere. Harry lifted his head, blinking, dazed, and saw Draco in front of him, shattering a second wooden disk as he watched.

Voldemort was narrowing his eyes, obviously unable to believe that a boy had done this, had dared to defy him—

And then he paused, and laughed softly in Harry's direction. "This is the boy that was at the center of your mind," he said, in a voice weakened by pain and rage. "The one you care about. I shall take such pleasure in destroying him."

Voldemort's gloating was a mistake, Harry thought, in at least two ways. First, it gave Harry the anger to rip off another great swathe of Voldemort's unnatural magic, and send it running away into the sea.

Second, it gave Lucius Malfoy time to get there.

"Cremo!"

The rest of Voldemort's wooden disks burst into flame. Voldemort screamed like something dying, like something wounded, and wheeled to face Lucius, who had just lowered his wand and was looking at his former lord with no expression whatsoever on his face.

Harry gathered himself. Voldemort's magic was building, shifting, no doubt aiming at Lucius. His wand had gone soaring back to his hand by now, and while his wandless power might be drained, he was still dangerous. An Avada Kedavra could still lay Lucius low.

Harry imagined his enemy utterly drained of magic, and struck out wildly with his will, aiming straight at everything Voldemort was.

It didn't work, as Harry had thought it wouldn't, ripping an intense wound but not a mortal one. Voldemort turned around, his eyes narrowed, and then reached out and pinched Harry's siphon shut. Harry gasped at the pain, but felt a healthy dose of satisfaction to go with it. He should have done that long since. We rattled him. And we utterly destroyed whatever plan he had to capture or kill the Muggles. I hope.

A voice spoke from behind Harry, saying his name. Connor's voice.

Voldemort turned. He spoke no word, but a boiling black light left his wand, a spell Harry didn't recognize, aimed straight at Connor. Harry wasn't quick enough to stop it.

Harry did have the time to think about what should happen in the next few moments, as the chattering plans in his head shut up and one voice alone remained, one that assessed the risk. It was an unknown curse, one that Connor was more than likely not to survive. And if Connor died or was destroyed, then Harry knew he would not long survive his brother. The guilt alone would tear him apart.

On the other hand, he had at least a chance of being able to survive the curse, whatever it did, since his magic was so much stronger than Connor's, and Voldemort had been seriously weakened. And he had former Death Eaters among his allies. There was a chance that one of them had seen Voldemort use this curse before and would know how to counteract it. They would have the motivation to help him where they might not want to help Connor.

Sometimes, his training in sacrifice was a wonderful thing, to let him make such decisions so fast and so clearly.

He rose and flung himself in the way of the curse.

Black walls snapped shut around him, his mind closed in on itself, and then he tumbled into darkness, and silence, and cold.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Psychology on the Wing

Henrietta had to admit some disappointment when she finally recovered from the spell of that stupid whistle and found herself with only inexperienced Death Eaters to fight—students from Durmstrang, by the look of them. She shrugged as she gestured with her wand for them to come ahead. One thing opponents like this were good for was practicing her experimental spellwork.

“Avada Kedavra,” she said, mildly enough, but she swept her wand in a long wave, left to right, as she spoke the spell, trying as hard as she could to kill two with just the one curse.

It didn’t quite work. One of the boys facing her dropped dead, and the other sagged, but came back to his feet, since just the edge of the green light had hit him. Henrietta frowned. That’s disappointing. She put him under Crucio to soothe her feelings, and turned to the rest of them.

She found it hard to look at the center of the battlefield, where Potter battled the Dark Lord. It was too much like looking into the heart of the sun. Magic flared there, as attractive as the light that flared from the sun, and as dazzling. Pay too much attention to it, and Henrietta would be tempted to dash forward and hurl herself into the circle, just to feel that much power blaze around her in the moments before it consumed her.

Instincts dropped her to one knee as a Cutting Curse went over her head. She turned and gestured once, speaking the spell nonverbally, and another young Durmstrang Death Eater was swimming in his own intestines. Henrietta rolled her eyes. Children these days. Did no one teach him to shield?

Someone roared in front of her. Henrietta looked up in interest as a burly Death Eater came towards her, his face nearly black with rage. Well. This looks like a more interesting opponent.

She rose and bowed her head slightly, the formal invitation to a duel. He ignored her, and just attacked. There was a lot of raw power behind the hexes he chose, but that gave him problems when

Henrietta bounced them off her Shield Charm and sent them back at him. Then he backed up, and neglected to watch his footing in the shifting sand, and went down.

Henrietta sighed. Not a challenge after all. I wish Evan Rosier were here. He was a challenge. She smiled a bit. Rosier had been the only Death Eater who'd tried to "recruit" her during the First War and still managed to escape; she'd killed the others. She started off restlessly across the beach, looking for someone like that, someone who appeared experienced and competent.

Her allies, such as they were, had already taken all the best pickings. Henrietta frowned as she watched Honoria dueling a tall woman with long blonde hair. The girl sent ridiculous illusions after her, and never failed to make her enemy flinch, each time. She was playing with her. Henrietta shook her head. Of course Honoria's illusions were powerful, but she was a halfblood, and, worse in Henrietta's eyes, the daughter of a Light-inclined wizard. She didn't deserve the opponent that chance and the vagaries of battle had gifted her with.

She drew closer to the center of the battle, after all, though she kept a solid wall of fighters between her and the Dark Lord so that she wasn't tempted to rush in. As she absently killed a Death Eater or two, she studied Potter. He was kneeling there, not doing anything much on the physical plane, but obviously draining power from the Dark Lord on the magical one. Henrietta could feel immense amounts of magic sliding through him.

And yet, Potter doesn't swallow and keep it. Remarkable.

Perhaps not so much remarkable as stupid, when you get right down to it.

Then Lucius's son destroyed one of those wooden disks the Dark Lord was so fond of, and the Dark Lord just had to take a moment to pause and gloat about what he would do to the boy. Henrietta nodded slowly. Yes, it seemed that she had made the right choice to follow Potter after all. The Dark Lord could not be depended on to keep his mind on the battle.

But it would be so much better if there was a way of gaining control of Potter, if I could make him do what I told him to do.

As she watched, Lucius arrived and set the rest of the disks on fire, and then a boy who was Potter's brother, from the pictures in the papers, became the target of the Dark Lord's next curse.

And Potter stepped in the way.

Henrietta narrowed her eyes as she watched him fall. The papers were correct. He was raised, trained, to sacrifice himself for that boy gaping like a turkey with its mouth open to the rain.

The seed of a plan stirred to life in her mind. She knew the end result, and the psychology of Potter's that she would manipulate, though she did not know as yet how she would achieve it.

As she had thought would happen, the Dark Lord took the moment to fold his wounded dignity around him and flee the battlefield. Perhaps he did not believe his curse would keep Potter out for long—though Potter currently lay motionless on the sand, with his brother and Lucius's son tugging frantically at his arms and Lucius himself striding towards them, hissing at them to move away. Then the green-golden snakes added to the confusion by flooding back towards Potter, away from the dead bodies of two basilisks, and as the Death Eaters Apparated out and followed their master, the rest of Potter's minions came shoving forward to gawk.

No one was paying attention to Henrietta, even when she noiselessly slid between Honoria and Burke, and no one else saw what she saw, lying free on the sand not far from Potter's head.

She stooped and picked the objects up, thought becoming action the moment she had it, and slid them into a pocket.

She did not know if she would manage to keep her little prizes undetected throughout the aftermath of the battle, which would surely involve taking Potter back to Hogwarts and hovering over his bed like good little minions. There might be someone who had seen her take them, and then she would have to hand them over. That was all right,

if it happened. She would be able to pretend she'd been looking out for Potter's safety and only his safety. In fact, she should look at them more closely anyway, before she used them. They might be worthless.

But if she could keep them, and they were worth something, then she had her plan.

Henrietta smiled, and then looked back up the beach as screams echoed through the silence. I suppose I should remove the Cruciatus Curse now.

She went back up the beach, removed the curse, and casually dispatched the silly young Death Eater. It was doing a favor to the Dark Lord, really, to reap his ranks of the untried and the witless. He ought to thank her.

Charles narrowed his eyes as he watched the others crowd in around Potter, and Snape order them away with little more than a snap of his robes as he seemed to Apparate in to Potter's side. Charles did not speak—he did not often speak in situations like this—but stood and listened to Burke and Belville converse in hushed, agitated voices.

“...give himself up for his brother, rather than one of us, what good is he?” Belville was demanding.

“Exactly my thoughts. Exactly my thoughts.” Charles didn't need to look to know that Burke would be nodding fiercely, his jowls flapping. He hadn't met the man often, but in this case, that was long enough to take his measure. “He'd sacrifice himself for family. Very noble. Very admirable, in fact, if he were the head of a pureblood family and doing that for his heir. But he's a war-leader. He has to think of his body and his magic as the king on the chessboard, not as pawns.”

Belville murmured some agreement that Charles did not deign to listen to. He turned to follow, instead, while Snape and Malfoy, walking side by side, carried Potter's body back to Hogwarts.

Charles hated to be shoved. He made up his mind slowly. He knew himself for a cautious man. Medusa had sometimes teased him about

how cautious he was, and how often he might have accomplished more than he did, if he'd just been a bit more quick-witted and clever on his feet.

But he'd had a clear glimpse of Potter and that black curse, and he was a father of two twin boys. He'd seen the calculation in Potter's eyes, the imperceptible moment before he'd arched up and taken the brunt of the spell. Potter had known exactly what he was doing. He'd taken that curse for Connor Potter the way that Owen would have to save Michael. Owen was protective of his younger brother to a fault; Charles had known that since their first year at Durmstrang, when Headmaster Karkaroff had called him in to discuss Owen's punishment for cursing a professor who'd failed Michael's History of the Dark Arts project and yelled at him. Owen had given the professor a second head that yelled constant abuse in his ears.

Potter was being a brother in that moment, not a sacrifice, and that was an impulse that Charles would not have wanted him cured of, lest he turn into another Lord. Lords, Charles had decided long ago, were those who would put their own power and their own lives even above their own flesh and blood.

Connor Potter was not yet, perhaps, at the point of knowing when he should die for his brother. Harry Potter, though, was exactly where he should be. That was enough for Charles. He would watch their young leader's back.

And that meant watching the greatest threat to him, which in this group was Henrietta Bulstrode. She'd stooped down and picked something up. Charles found himself very much wanting to know what it was.

Lucius kept his head bowed as Severus argued with him about the curse, its causes, and its effects. He didn't need to argue back. He knew he was right. He had seen the Dark Lord use that curse before—usually on his enemies, but sometimes on his Death Eaters, for practice. Lucius had twice seen it cured. He knew what was needed, and why their Lord had sought to hit Harry's brother and not Harry himself with it. Though the procedure would be somewhat difficult considering how stubborn young Harry was, it was not impossible that someone should enter his mind and remove the curse.

And Lucius already knew it had to be him. This was the point of view that Severus hadn't quite come around to yet, even now that they'd Apparated back to the outskirts of Hogsmeade and were skirting the village, headed for the Forbidden Forest. He still thought, poor fool, that he could enter Harry's mind and pull him out of this.

Lucius spared a moment to thank Merlin that he loved only his wife and son as much as Severus loved Harry, and that neither Narcissa nor Draco would expect him to take the kind of insane risk that Severus was talking about just because of his relationship to them. Love made men foolish. Lucius knew when to step back and step aside. If that curse had hit Narcissa, and Severus could have rescued her, then he would let Severus enter her mind, and never complained in the first place.

A deliberate footstep sounded to his left a few moments after the green-and-gold snakes flooded off Potter's body and into the trees. Lucius turned and met Narcissa's eyes. A glance told him everything he needed to know. She walked with a limp that indicated a recently healed wound. Lucius raised his eyebrows.

Narcissa smiled. "Dead," she said, meaning the Death Eater who had done that to her.

Lucius nodded. "You knew him?"

Narcissa shrugged. "A student at Durmstrang. I could describe him."

"Do so," said Lucius, and set himself to listen to recollections of dark hair, unusual height, and, most importantly, a distinctive jut to the collarbone, as if it had once been broken. Easy enough to find out his family from that description, and Lucius would find out how he could hurt them, and he would.

"Lucius, are you even listening to me?"

Lucius turned and glanced at Severus. Thanks to Narcissa's description and the crunch of fallen leaves under their feet as they

walked through the Forest, it had been easy enough to ignore his chatter. “No, Severus. You are repeating yourself, and that will not help our Potter. You know what has to be done. You know that you cannot do it. And no,” he continued, before Severus could say anything, “nor can Hawthorn, nor Black, nor Adalrico. You care too much about him. I am the only Marked one who stands a chance of bringing him out.”

Severus glared at him. Lucius returned his gaze calmly. Severus was a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield; he had all but ripped apart the three Death Eaters keeping him from Potter. But his temper had its disadvantages. Now he obviously longed, wished, yearned for, the ability to tell Lucius to go to hell.

But he had no choice save to bow his head in a single curt nod.

“Father?”

Lucius glanced over his shoulder. Draco had not said a word since they rescued Potter and the Dark Lord vanished, which was as it should be. His voice would have broken, betrayed emotion too intense, so it was right that he keep silent. But his face and his eyes spoke for him, and Lucius did not like that at all. Sooner or later, Draco will have to learn to control his emotions.

“You can save him?” Draco asked.

Several dozen different things to say sprang to Lucius’s lips, among them warnings to Draco for doubting him. However, he decided that perhaps his son could be allowed this one—one—moment of doubt. He had not seen the curse before, he did not know how it worked, and since Severus and Lucius both did, it wasn’t information they’d included in their argument.

“I can,” he said.

Draco closed his eyes and looked away, shaking lightly. Lucius narrowed his eyes. He should trust Potter to take care of himself more. I know that he took the curse because he trusted that he could survive it. He was right.

The rest of the walk back to the school was boring enough—most of their uneasy alliance kept their mouths shut, and the people who talked, Hawthorn and Narcissa, said nothing interesting—that Lucius observed Connor Potter. He trudged nearly at the end of the line, his head down, obscuring the famous heart-shaped scar that supposedly proclaimed his defeat of the Dark Lord when a child. Lucius knew something more about that, now, and knew that Harry had been the one, not Connor, to deflect the Killing Curse.

The boy had done nothing in the battle, and now he must think that he was the reason Harry was lying pale and motionless in Severus's arms, unable to see anything other than the world the curse had constructed for him, inside his own head.

Well, good. Lucius hoped that meant the boy would grow up. So far, Connor Potter had proven a disappointment. If he could become good enough to fight at Harry's side, then he would serve a purpose. If he did not, then Lucius would do what he could to carefully, discreetly, separate Harry from his brother.

Our Potter needs to think of the future, not the past, and stop considering himself a sacrifice. Connor Potter could die, and the world would not stop turning. Harry Potter could die, and many things would become—uncomfortable.

Snape laid Harry gently in the bed in the hospital wing, only half-listening to Poppy Pomfrey's chatter as she tried to ascertain what was wrong with him. She would find magical exhaustion, of course, and more ordinary fatigue from resisting the pain that Voldemort had put him through. But the Mark Mirror Curse affected the mind, not the body, and not all of Poppy's spells would show her how to counter that. It was the Dark Lord's invention, his special plaything.

And Snape knew that Lucius was right, and he was the best candidate for bringing Harry out of it.

Snape smoothed Harry's hair away from his forehead, and stared at the angry red flare of the lightning bolt scar. He should have insisted

that Harry shut that link with Occlumency long since. It was not worth it to keep it open, not when it cost him so much in pain and nightmares.

But Harry had been stubborn, and then angry with him, and Snape had not been able to insist.

Now, he would.

He thought about everything else. And in the end, he still endangered himself. Recklessly. Without caring what it would do to the rest of us. Snape felt the anger begin to burn, at least as hot as the pain that had flared through him when he saw Harry make the decision to put his body in front of his brother's once more. That will end. I will make it end. And Regulus will help me.

"How is he?"

Snape moved out of the way so that Regulus could approach the bed. He had sensed his old friend hovering in a corner of the hospital wing the moment they entered it. Regulus had felt no calling—Voldemort had obviously not thought it worthwhile to summon his still-loyal Death Eaters when he believed he had enough magic to take Harry—so he would have come to Hogwarts at the time they were supposed to set off for the tunnels and found no one there. Snape imagined him Apparating to London and racing frantically through the checkpoints, discovering them all gone. He shook his head. Harry should think about what he has done to him, as well as to the rest of us—Draco, and I, and even his more distant allies.

"He will recover," he said softly to Regulus. "You did not try to use your Mark to find and follow us. Good."

Regulus sighed and stared down at the Mark on his arm. Snape glared at it with more loathing than he reserved for his own. Regulus had revealed, as Snape had long suspected, that the Dark Lord had used it as a conduit for the pain he had suffered, before finally being Transfigured into a dog. He'd also left—traps in it, of a kind that Snape didn't understand, and which had nearly destroyed him when he tried to look at them last week. Regulus didn't dare try to use the

Mark for anything, including finding Voldemort, unless he wanted to die.

Snape had had to spend some time conjuring and destroying delicate glass containers after Regulus left him last week. If those he cared for suffered pain that he could help, then he would help it. He hated, above all things, feeling helpless before a power greater than his own.

Perhaps there is something to the research Lucius has been doing after all, trying to find a way to destroy the Mark. Snape resolved to ask him later, and then looked up at the sound of a throat being politely cleared.

Lucius stood beside Harry's head, his own Dark Mark bared and gleaming. Poppy had gone—somewhere. Snape hoped in irritation that Lucius hadn't Obliviated her. Memory Charms often didn't interact well with minds tuned to medical magic. "The Dark Lord used the Mark Mirror Curse," he said. "This is a mental spell of his own devising, which constructs a reality for the victim so pleasant that he will not want to leave it. Someone who wears a Dark Mark and feels affection for the victim may pull him out. However, too much affection will lead to a desire not to smash apart that imagined reality, and the rescuer will become part of it. I believe I am the best candidate to bring Mr. Potter out of his coma without becoming trapped myself, as I will administer a short, sharp shock better than anyone in this room. Does anyone disagree?"

No one did, Snape saw, with a quick glance around. Even if Regulus had wanted to rescue Harry himself—and he could certainly argue for a superior knowledge of Harry's mind—his poisoned Mark would insure his death if he tried. Right now, he was staring at the floor and clenching his left arm as if he would like to tear it off.

Lucius nodded, pressed his Mark to Harry's left temple, and closed his eyes. His breathing halted for a moment. When it began once more, it matched Harry's. Snape felt the tickle of a mental sliding against his Occlumency shields, and knew that Lucius had passed out of his mind and into Harry's.

Narcissa came up to grasp her husband's hand. No one said anything, though Draco leaned on the edge of the bed, looking stricken, and most of Harry's allies watched with various expressions of interest. Regulus's voice seemed loud in the silence that had fallen.

"When he comes back, I am going to give him such a talking-to."

Snape gave Regulus a tight smirk. In this, as in so many other things fifteen years ago, they were in accord. Now that Snape could be sure this was the true Regulus, and not merely a sliced-off shard of Voldemort's madness floating free in Harry's head, he was fully prepared to welcome help in dealing with his recalcitrant charge.

Harry walked the halls of Hogwarts, and it was wonderful. People hurried past him on the way to class, calling to their friends and comparing notes hastily; Professor Merryweather had announced a simultaneous exam for all her Defense Against the Dark Arts classes that week, and no one felt ready. Hermione bumped into Harry and murmured an apology, not looking up from the book she read. A cloud of smoke further up the corridor indicated that Fred and George Weasley had discovered another item certain to be confiscated the moment Filch proved it existed.

Voices churned and swelled and talked about ordinary things, only slightly touched by the tension of the war. When someone did look ready to cry, they only had to glance up the hall, and then their gaze would alight on Connor Potter, calm and steady. He always had the right word to soothe fears or remind people that Voldemort wasn't so formidable, not if a baby could survive him. Right now, he ruffled the hair of a first-year Ravenclaw and said something that made her smile shyly up at him.

And no one noticed Harry.

No one stared at him as if they expected him to help them, though they didn't know how. No one glared with the disapproval that said they knew abuse charges should never have been filed against his parents and Dumbledore. No one wanted things of him that Harry didn't know how to give, normal obedience and trust and belief. When people approached him, they conducted practical transactions,

running on the rituals of promises and debts and obligations. Harry had gained several Dark pureblood families as allies for Connor through those bargains. The people who mattered knew who Harry was, and what they wanted of him, Harry knew how to give.

It was a bit of a shock to turn and see Lucius Malfoy standing in the middle of corridor, observing him. People brushed past him as if he weren't there. Harry felt a frisson of unease glide up his spine. He inclined his head in a bow to Lucius, making it exactly the proper depth for a respected, if not trusted, ally. He danced well with Mr. Malfoy.

Yes, I do, he thought firmly, and beat away the memories that told him of times outside the dances, times when his life wasn't so simple. The halls of Hogwarts wavered around him for a moment, then came back, strengthened by his will and desire to believe them real. Harry let out a little breath, and said, "Welcome, Mr. Malfoy. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Mr. Potter." Lucius paused a moment, as if considering his next move, and Harry waited. Entirely proper, for a dance. "Harry."

No. That's not fair. He can't expect this of me, not when I've got everything so nicely settled, when I don't have to argue with anybody and I know I'm not failing them because they're not asking me to be just like everyone else. Harry lowered his head and tensed. His magic soared up around him. He remembered, vaguely, that it had been stronger at one point. Memories of tearing webs and eating power and so on tried to present themselves to him. He shoved them away. This was the reality. He would make it be so.

Lucius hissed, as though he didn't like the stones of Hogwarts firming under his feet. His eyes had taken on a hard sheen that Harry hated, because Lucius was letting him see that he was angry. That wasn't part of a dance. Lucius was supposed to remain emotionless. "Harry. Stop this nonsense immediately. Voldemort has enslaved your will, but you are too intelligent to think this is real, since you have two contradictory sets of memories."

“But I want this to be the real set,” Harry replied, and Hogwarts became more present around him. It was easier to lock the memories up in a closet and refuse to let them out. Connor’s laughter rang down the hall, and Harry could forget, if he wanted, that he’d ever heard his voice uncertain, pleading, forced to question his place and presence in the world.

Lucius leaned towards him. “So you would be a coward? You would leave my son to suffer, and your brother, and your guardian, and all those you profess to care about?”

Harry flinched and closed his eyes. “I can’t give them what they want,” he said. “I know that now. Everything I do is wrong. I can’t love Draco the way he deserves. No one’s going to believe that I made the decision to risk my life for my brother’s, instead of just leaping blindly into the path of the curse. If I go back, Snape and Regulus will be disappointed in me. I keep struggling to show people that I can learn, I can change, I can be something other than an abused child, and they keep shoving me back into the mold of what they think I am. I don’t believe that I’m ever going to break that mold. They’ll always see me as something other than what I really am, or they’ll want something from me that they deserve but that I can’t give them—like Draco. And they won’t trust me to lead them, and that will cost lives. At least here I know exactly what I can do.”

He hadn’t known he was going to say all that until it poured out. Lucius said nothing. Harry opened his eyes at last, driven by intolerable curiosity, and saw Lucius staring at him thoughtfully.

“It is no wonder that the Dark Lord’s spell chose this particular reality for you to inhabit,” Lucius breathed. “The curse works with your deepest desires. And your deepest desire is for your life to be simple and uncomplicated, though you know it cannot be.”

Harry scowled at him. “It can be as complicated as it likes. But I’m so sick and tired of failing everybody. Here, I know that I won’t fail them.”

“But you are,” Lucius pointed out. “You deprive us of our best chance to fight the Dark Lord while you remain here.”

"I no longer believe that I can be the leader you need," Harry said quietly. "The moment I risked my life for my brother, I realized how other people would see it—as a deliberate sacrifice. It wasn't, but try convincing Snape of that." Anger and bitterness choked his voice for a moment. He swallowed, and managed to continue. "And there are other decisions I'll never make that they want me to make. Adalrico, for example. He wanted me to use the Black Plague Curse. Others will want me to look aside as they make inroads in the Ministry, or discriminate against Muggleborns, or go right on enslaving and using magical creatures—and I never would. I never could. If I can't give them what they want, what kind of leader am I?"

Lucius blinked, once or twice. Then he said, "The art of leadership is not about surrendering your own desires for the good of others, Harry. It is about learning to judge. If you believe something to be a good decision, then you make it." He cocked his head to the side, and his eyes were bright with an amusement Harry had never seen them show. "I cannot imagine you compliant. I would not want to. If you feel that we are shoving you, pushing you against your will, then shove back."

"I don't want to impose my will on others—"

"And true leadership is also a very long way from that," Lucius said calmly. He was smiling now. "Wizards have long made those with Lord-level magic leaders. You have Lord-level magic. Very well. You cannot change that. Now make yourself a leader. No one has said that you must obey everything that another person asks of you. If Severus insults your principles, insult his back. He hates that. Balance my son's desires with your own. I know Draco. He would not want you to bed him merely because he desired it." Harry felt his face heat up, but Lucius might have been talking about applied Arithmancy versus the theoretical, from the calmness of his tone. "Dance this dizzy and complicated path, and if you chose to risk your life for your brother's by calculation rather than blind instinct, then come out of this dreamworld and tell them that. No one will know it, not for certain, if you remain here."

"You could go back and tell them," said Harry, with a last feeble hope.

Lucius's smile turned to a more familiar one, all teeth. "I will most certainly back you, if you come out."

"Sometimes, I don't like you," Harry told him, even as the imaginary Hogwarts around him began to fade.

Lucius laughed, a full-throated sound that Harry would have imagined Voldemort capable of making before Lucius. "I underestimated you, Harry," he murmured. "You would have come out on your own, I think. Even you know this is not real, and these objections are only the last feeble gasp of beliefs that you have almost put aside. You were hiding, but you would have put your head out of your shell."

Harry closed his eyes reluctantly. He was tired, he thought mutinously. He'd wanted to go somewhere nobody would bother him or demand normal, impossible things of him, and his mind had obliged.

But he didn't think he could have quite escaped the second set of memories or the knowledge that this was Voldemort's curse, and that his decision to choose Connor's life over his own meant nothing if he didn't come out of the coma the curse had put him in.

That doesn't mean I have to like Lucius, though.

Henrietta had to admit to a bit of disappointment when Malfoy opened his eyes and said, with a faint smile, "He will live. He is coming out of the coma, though it might take him some time to return to full consciousness."

Malfoy's son went white in the face and put his head down on the sheets next to Potter. Henrietta curled her lip. Edith would never behave so. She did what her mother asked of her, because she was better-trained than Malfoy obviously kept his heir.

She moved quietly towards the door of the hospital wing, not hurrying, not being obvious. Her eyes marked out, meanwhile, that Belville had tightened his lips and Burke looked sullen. Henrietta smiled. She already knew whom she would ask to aid her in her plan. It was convenient that the two most dissatisfied with Potter were also the

weakest of the circle surrounding him. She could control vain Mortimer and dear Edward without a problem.

“Bulstrode.”

Henrietta turned around and gave a pretty little nod to Charles Rosier-Henlin. “Greetings. Aren’t you glad that Potter will live? I know that I am. My future is now more secure.”

“I want what you took from the beach.”

Henrietta widened her eyes, and then dropped them to the floor. She sighed as she pulled the knife with the dark hilt and blade of Light from her robe pocket. “I was only keeping it for him,” she said meekly, as she handed it over to Rosier-Henlin.

He did not make even a pretense of believing her, but then, Henrietta hadn’t tried to be very believable. As he accepted the blade, Henrietta waited, keeping her eyes down, wondering if he would ask...

“I will tell Potter about this. He deserves to know who—rescued—his knife for him.”

Henrietta nodded, knowing Rosier-Henlin meant to warn Potter about her. That was quite all right. If he just didn’t ask...

Rosier-Henlin turned away.

Triumph burst into Henrietta’s heart, but she kept her face blank and calm as she asked Hawthorn Parkinson to convey her best wishes to Potter, and then turned and hurried out of the room. She had training in masks of serenity. She would not betray herself.

He only saw me pick up the one object, not the other.

Before she let herself get too excited, though, she made sure to pause in a remote corner of Hogwarts and consider the small curl of dark hair in her pocket. When she was satisfied it was Potter’s, she went on her way, her expression grave and her step light.

She had been no slouch at Potions when she was a student. She knew how to brew Polyjuice.

Harry opened his eyes, slowly, and blinked. When he turned his head, he saw Snape sitting in a chair on the right side of the bed, and Regulus on the other. Harry tried to speak, but had a goblet of water held to his lips before he could. He rolled his eyes and obediently drank.

“Draco?” he whispered.

“Survived unwounded,” Snape said smoothly. “He’s sleeping right now. It’s the middle of the night.”

“And Connor?” Harry asked, knowing this was the calm before the storm, but holding fast to what Lucius had told him. Lucius, of all people. I wonder if he was as surprised as I was to learn that he can actually think in moral terms?

“Likewise, survived unwounded.” That was Regulus, and his voice was a snarl that would have done Sirius credit. Harry rolled his head to face him, knowing before he looked that Regulus would wear a stern expression. “We are going to have a little talk about your risk-taking, Harry, the moment you’re well enough to bear it,” he said.

Harry raised his eyebrows. I know my motives for what I did. They might not believe in them, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t valid. “I imagine we are,” he said.

Regulus sat back and frowned at him, as if unable to comprehend why Harry didn’t look guilty and terrified, but Harry closed his eyes before he could ask another question. The guilt was still there, of course—there never had been the terror that Regulus had imagined—but he believed he was, finally, ready to deal with it.

If I want them to treat me like an adult, I have to act like one. If I want them to have a real leader, I have to be one, and that doesn’t mean selfishly hiding in my mind, or adopting plans just because they want me to. If I want them to see what I really am, I have to show them that I’ll never be normal, and why.

Lucius was right, and that was the last gasp of those particular beliefs. I don't think I could have abandoned the people who love me. Say I take them on trust for once, and believe that they really do love me unconditionally. Then they can bear a few disappointments, like my arguing with them instead of just submitting.

This should be fun.

Interlude: Wax Wings and Missing Muggles

September 22nd, 1995

Dear Harry:

Really, you disappoint me again. You had soared so close to perfection, too, so close to the sun. Of course, the sun melts wax wings, and your wings are nothing but wax, as you have shown in this latest silly escapade. Are you burned? I hope so. One hopes for a burn when a child has done a silly thing. Were I there, I would hold your hand in the fire myself until you learned.

Did I contact you about this attack? No. Did you listen to the warning that I did issue, about my Lord feeding on Muggleborn children? No.

When will you overcome your pride and listen to your elders and betters, Harry? Had you done so, then you would have listened to my silence and known this was a trap—and not bothered going. As it is, my Lord managed to capture several dozen Muggles with his sirens, luring them into the water and the clutch of the pretty creatures. The Obliviators are hard at work, trying to contain knowledge of the magical world and come up with a cover story for that many missing Muggles.

Many missing Muggles. I can use alliteration when I want to, do you see? One day I may hope to rank myself with the greatest poets.

What does he want the Muggles for? Well, at one time I might have told you, but now I won't. You need to fly on your own again for a time, and learn to read the silence. What can a Dark Lord gain from Muggles? Ask yourself that, Harry, and you will have the answer.

You have been luckier than you deserve, escaping with your life like that. And my Lord has been unluckier than he deserves. I can say that my life is quite interesting, with this contest between the two of you, but it does remain ultimately disappointing that you will not listen to good advice.

Do not fly so close to the sun, or I will come and hold your hand in the fire myself, to teach you a lesson. Children must learn their place.

In the game,

Evan Rosier.

Intermission: Vengeance and Trauma

Lucius stroked the top of the small cage sitting on the library desk as he read the message he'd received from the Ministry over again.

September 22nd, 1995

Dear Mr. Malfoy:

I of course understand your concern that new laws impacting on the activities of Dark wizards might be made without your input and consent. Since your family has traditionally been considered Dark, these laws must be expected to lay a greater burden on you than proclaimed Light families such as Gloryflower and Opalline. I am flattered that you have taken the trouble to contact me about it. It is true that I come from a Dark pureblooded family on my mother's side, and though I myself have not Declared, I have a sentimental regard for many of the old dances. If you would like to visit my office on the sixteenth of October, then I would be happy to explain the new laws to you, and why I believe the Dark families have nothing to worry about.

Yours sincerely,

Auror Edmund Wilmot.

Lucius curled his lip slightly. Wilmot was no pureblooded name that he was familiar with. More than likely, this Auror was a halfblood, his father perhaps even a Muggle. And he was probably lying about his mother coming from a Dark pureblooded family. Lucius didn't know any Dark pureblooded witch who would lower herself by marrying like that.

Then, of course, he had to remember that he was related by marriage to Andromeda Black Tonks, who had done that exact thing.

Lucius shook his head briskly and folded the letter. He had already written Wilmot back, accepting the invitation. He trusted Wilmot—who was Nott's contact on the cells, the one who would arrange to get Lucius to Lily and James Potter—to take care of things from there. If

anyone questioned him about Lucius's presence, that would be Wilmot's fault, and not Lucius's.

Lucius stroked the top of the cage again, then crouched down to look in through the close-set bars. One of the insects inside jumped hungrily forward at him, only to crash against the bars and fall back. Lucius chuckled. He caught a glimpse of long black legs, seven of them, and fluttering wings, dark but deeply sheened with green, and barbed pincers. He tried to imagine the pain that would result when one of those insects dug into a healthy, living body.

He found that he could not imagine the pain.

That was all right. James Potter would imagine it soon enough.

Lucius rose and walked across the library to select a book from the shelf. He had the outline of the curse that he intended to use for Lily Potter all ready. However, the curse was eminently flexible, and Lucius could place other spells within it, all of which would affect her mind at intervals that he controlled. There might be an incantation perfect for expressing his displeasure that he hadn't yet found, or had forgotten, or had dismissed as not worthy of his notice and should reconsider.

He opened the book, flipped through a few pages, and began reading. Ten minutes later, he sat up, staring intently at the words.

Yes. Yes. That would be appropriate, and I do not believe that I left it this long.

Of course, Lucius mused, he might have encountered this spell before he hit on the idea of the flexible curse, and discounted it. Usually, Neco Identidem could not be cast in concert with other spells; it required time and mental space in which to work. With the curses all joined in a round, however, that problem was eliminated. Lucius sat back to read again about the effects of the curse, a warm glow growing in his stomach.

It will never be enough for what they have done, but it will be enough for my share of the vengeance.

The door of the library opened, and Narcissa entered. Lucius looked up at her and raised an eyebrow when he realized that she wore red robes, rather than her more usual black or dark green.

"A special occasion?" he asked.

"I do not wish the blood to show." Narcissa smoothed the red robes down once, then turned and showed him the side view. "What do you think? Do I look suitably terrifying? An angel of vengeance?"

"A very phoenix of vengeance, my dear," Lucius assured her, and had the satisfaction of hearing Narcissa laugh softly.

"Very good." Narcissa came forward and bent to kiss him, deliberately not touching any part of his body with her hands. Lucius took care of that, winding his right hand in her hair and pulling her head back. Narcissa watched him with a peaceful smile. She knew that she could die on her hunt, and Lucius knew it. When he bent and kissed her, he put all that bloody wisdom in his kiss. Narcissa had her eyes shut when he pulled back.

"I wish I could stay," she murmured. "But my sister will be so disappointed if I don't keep our lunch date."

Lucius breathed out over her lips and let her go. Narcissa moved to the door, and paused a moment to look at him. If she died, she would leave him a memory of herself in glory and strength, and that, Lucius thought as he stared into her eyes, blue shining against the pale skin of her face, was more than enough.

She departed, then, and Lucius turned back to the book. When he was sure he fully understood Neco Identidem, he rose and went to write a letter to an acquaintance whom he kept employed as a fact-hound. It was time to find out which Dark pureblood family on the Continent, or in Britain for that matter, had had a son who went to Durmstrang, was tall, and had cracked his collarbone at some point in his life.

The letter was soon written, and Lucius went back to his library shelves. His hand hovered over the books that he had used to choose spells for vengeance on the Potters, but moved on a few moments later. The whole point of his revenge on Harry's parents was that it should be inconspicuous, so that no one would ever learn how much they had suffered.

When punishing the family of the man who had tried to kill his wife, he need not use the same finesse.

And Lucius wanted blood.

Narcissa Apparated once she was outside the Malfoy Manor wards, and landed in a place familiar to her from scattered days of childhood and one long summer, when her parents had simultaneously decided that they wanted to take their daughters away from home but didn't want to risk Wayhouse's odd sense of humor. Narcissa felt her face relax into a smile. She hadn't grown up by the sea, but she loved it, and the scent of salt air and the roar of waves worked as a balm on her. She stood enjoying them for a moment before she walked towards the house.

Cobley-by-the-Sea was the largest of the Black family estates, except for Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. The house rambled along high cliffs on the coast of Cornwall, with the sea leaping and roaring beneath. Magic gleamed on the windows and the doors, spreading out in subtle webs that made most Muggles think Cobley was just part of the cliff. Narcissa would have had a hard time seeing it if she wasn't a Black. Distrustful people, her ancestors, to be so wary of other wizards and witches.

Narcissa wasn't surprised that Bellatrix had been sighted here. Cobley was a dreaming house, old and rich in additions, and it had long been family rumor that there were entrances into it which the wards didn't comprehend. Bellatrix would look to find one of those entrances. She might be days at it, but the treasures inside Cobley—not weapons, but treasures—made the effort worthwhile.

Tertian Brown had been the one to write to her and inform Narcissa that he'd seen her sister nearby on one of his herb-gathering

expeditions. Narcissa was still impressed that he'd had the courage to defy his formidable wife, Henrietta Bulstrode, and start a secret correspondence with her. And it must be secret, or Henrietta would have made sure to trade the information to Narcissa for a higher price.

Narcissa let the Atlantic spray soak her hair. For a moment, she stood on the edge of the cliff and relived a moment in her childhood when she might almost have believed that everything was all right, that death and madness didn't lie in the future. Andromeda had conjured a rope ladder for them to descend the cliffs and look for gulls' eggs. They'd climbed down, and seen a bright shape soaring overhead that Narcissa had always believed, privately, was a phoenix. Even Bella had gone silent with awe. The instant lingered in Narcissa's mind as a perfect mingling of sea and fire, wind and stone.

She heard the expected movement behind her a moment later. Narcissa smiled as she whirled around, her wand securely in her hand. She had known that standing on the edge of the cliff like that, clearly outlined against the horizon, would draw Bella. Her sister always struck at weakness.

Or perceived weakness, in this case, because Narcissa was ready with her conjured bonds, and Bellatrix went down a moment later, shrieking and spitting.

Narcissa walked towards her, biting her lip thoughtfully. She'd sworn to make Bella suffer, and so she would. However, Narcissa wanted to claim another permanent price from her, the way that last time she'd deprived Bella of her left hand. What should it be, though? It had to be something crippling, painful, and symbolic.

Oh, yes. I know.

Narcissa smiled, and crouched down beside her sister. Bella whipped her head around and tried to bite her. Narcissa didn't move, since the teeth snapped an inch short of her fingers. She'd judged the slack in the ropes very carefully.

"You don't have a greeting for your Cissy?" she asked, affecting hurt. "You don't think that I deserve a polite word and a kiss? We haven't seen each other in months, after all."

"Come near me," Bella said, voice as dark as her eyes, "and I will give you a kiss that will eat straight through your cheeks."

"Mother would have liked you to offer a real kiss," said Narcissa, as she drew a silver knife from her pocket. She'd found the knife in Grimmauld Place, and, after a few experiments, revealed the enchantment. The blade cut only human flesh when it was spoken to, and so was largely useless outside of torture, but since that was what Narcissa had planned for today, it would make a useful helper. She whispered a Levitation Charm, and the knife rose from her hand, vibrating slightly. "On the other hand, she's dead, and I suppose you don't have to worry any longer about disappointing her, Bella. But you do have to worry about disappointing me, and I am very much alive."

"Not for much longer," Bella spat. "My Lord will destroy you, Cissy. You should have bowed to him when you had the chance. He might have let you live after multiple Crucios. And now he won't! He won't, and it's all your fault! You've doomed yourself!" She gave a good imitation of her old cackle.

"How disappointing," Narcissa said, and began to walk in a circle around her sister, tracing her wand lazily above Bella's body. The knife followed her motions, and then sank, cutting through her sister's robes to expose her belly. "I did so want to be in the good graces of a raving madman with a face like a snake's and eyes like a rat's. Tell me, Bella, does he bed you? Is he good at eating you? I suppose that would be one advantage to his having no nose, at least."

Bella promptly began screaming incoherently and trying to bite her again. Narcissa had been waiting for that. She spoke a soft plea to the hovering knife.

It stabbed down, twisting through one fold of flesh and then out again. Bella's screams acquired a tinge of pain, but only a tinge. Narcissa knew she was too far gone in madness to react to the cutting as others would have.

That was all right. Narcissa could continue cutting her for a long time. She admired the sheen of blood on Bella's pale skin, and then whispered, "Up." The knife rose and spun, twisted and sank, sliced open Bella's belly and then cut up to her stomach. All the time, Bella screamed, and Narcissa knew she would have tried to grab her ankle and harm her, if her sister were in reach.

Narcissa never intended to be. The red robes were just a precaution. She kept moving, and the knife did the work for her, inflicting such wounds as Bella could never hope to survive if Narcissa weren't carrying potions to heal her and replenish her blood.

And finally, Narcissa did hear her sister scream as Harry must have screamed that night in the graveyard. Her eyes fluttered shut, and her mouth hang open in a devastating, silent cry. The knife kept her conscious.

Narcissa stepped cautiously close and poured the proper potions into her mouth. Bella choked and gagged and swallowed. Her wounds closed. Her body twitched as it made new blood to replace the lost liquid. Narcissa smiled and stepped back. She resumed her circle.

The knife resumed its work, slicing and severing and cutting. Narcissa had not yet decided whether she wanted to leave scars. She might, she thought. Harry had enough scars on the stump of his left hand and on his mind, soul, and emotions. A pity that Narcissa couldn't be sure she would scar her sister the same way by this treatment. Even when they were children, she had to make Bella physically suffer if she wanted to hurt her. She only reacted to taunts and insults by getting angry.

After three more healings, Narcissa thought a small dent was made in the threefold debt Bellatrix owed Harry, and called the knife back to her pocket with a small wave of her wand. She whispered a thanks. The knife stopped vibrating and again became an ordinary blade. Narcissa turned to face Bella.

Her sister took some moments to recover her breath and her lucidity—Narcissa would not say “sanity”—enough to notice her. Then she sneered. “What’s the matter, Cissy? Don’t you have the guts to kill me?”

“You have to stay alive and suffer,” said Narcissa calmly. “That’s the only way I’ll keep the vow I swore. I do feel sorry for you, though, Bella. It must not be very fulfilling following a man whose plans crumble when he faces a fifteen-year-old boy. And he really isn’t any good in bed, is he? Or you wouldn’t be so frustrated.”

As expected, that made Bella shriek and lunge against her bonds. This time, though, she wasn’t crying out in pain. Narcissa hoped to get some information from her before she made Bella pay the permanent price she had in mind.

Bella said a great many things that were of no use or no moment, mostly praising Lord Voldemort. Then she said, “And it’s not as though you’ll stop him from using Woodhouse or his old home all he likes, you know! You won’t! You can’t! His plans are too grand!”

Narcissa smiled. She had no idea where Woodhouse or “his old home” were, but Lucius might. And, even better, Bella didn’t seem to realize she’d given any important information away.

“Thank you, Bella,” she said sweetly, and then lifted her wand. Curiosity filled her like the scent of mint. She’d always wanted to try this spell, since the Slytherin girls’ rooms were full of the rumor of it during her Hogwarts years, but it wasn’t the kind of thing one practiced casually. Someone always knew someone else who had done it, a cousin’s sister’s friend or the like. It would be interesting to have first-hand experience of it. “Abrumpo mamillas!”

Bella let out a long, knife-edged wail of agony. Narcissa was grateful that she had made the knife cut her robes loose, or she would not have had the pleasure of seeing what was happening now—Bella’s breasts shriveling and turning soft and spongy, sagging on her chest into mushroom-like lumps. They broke off her chest a moment later, and rolled down her sides in clouds of dust. Bella went on screaming.

Narcissa chuckled. That was worth waiting to see. Quick, of course, but it has such a permanent effect.

“Stay safe, Bella,” she said. “And give my regards to your Lord. I suspect that even if you do like him bedding you, he might not like you so much anymore.”

She waved cheerfully to her sister, and then walked away to Apparate back to the Manor. There was still the chance that Bellatrix could cause grief and pain, of course—though Narcissa hardly thought she would do so today—but there was always that chance with her bitch of a sister; there was that chance with any Death Eater. And Narcissa might die in their next encounter. There was always that risk, too.

But it was the price she paid for the vengeance she wanted, consuming Bella piece by piece, maiming her steadily, until she had paid threefold for what she had done to Harry. The old vows of revenge were solemn things, not to be entered into lightly, and Narcissa had known what she was doing when she accepted this one.

When she has paid threefold, then she may die. But that will not be for some time yet.

“Remus? Can I talk to you a minute?”

Remus lifted his head and turned to face Connor, blinking. He’d been awake, of course—no chance of sleeping, not when he’d heard about Harry’s participation in the battle and slow recovery, and then had to talk softly to several Gryffindors frightened by the rumors of the war—but he was still surprised that his godson had come to talk to him this late at night.

He understood a moment later, when he saw Connor’s face. Humiliation and anger and grief chased themselves across his expression, and his scent, thick with emotion, challenged the constant smell of the torches. Remus knew Connor could not have slept while feeling like that.

He opened his arms, and Connor bolted across the room with a little sob and caught him close. Remus stroked his hair, and moved gently towards the back of his office. Minerva had given him a comfortable room, with several padded chairs where Gryffindors could collapse and yell or sob out their grief and their complaints to their Head of House. It was furnished in red and gold, which colors seemed to calm most of his charges down.

Perhaps they would even have calmed Connor down, Remus thought sadly, if the boy had lifted his head from his godfather's chest to see them. He kept his face buried in cloth, though, clutching Remus's robes and crying. They sat down together. Remus kept up a constant soft murmur, mixing encouraging words with questions about what was wrong.

He thought he could guess, of course. Minerva had got the story from Severus, and told him. Both Harry and Connor had gone to the battle on the beach, from which You-Know-Who was controlling sirens who had swum up the rivers miles away, especially in London, and lured Muggles into the water. The Daily Prophet had a story about it already, temporarily displacing the stories of the abuse case from the front page. Connor had not been in London to see helpless men, women, and children fall prey to the sirens' compelling songs, but he had seen curses hurled at close range. He had seen death. He had seen his brother take a curse for him.

The wonder, Remus thought as his hands stroked down Connor's back, is that he lasted this long before breaking. It was almost ten at night.

Finally, the tears stopped, and Connor lifted his face, gone red and blotchy. Remus already had a cloth ready; he'd laid in quite a supply of them after his first day talking to first-years who missed their homes and their mums. Connor wiped at his eyes, blew his nose, and gave a crooked smile.

"I suppose that you think I'm silly, huh?" he croaked, as he moved away and collapsed into another chair.

“Not at all,” said Remus quietly. His heart ached. Oh, of course Connor had known troubles before—even if they weren’t as deep and long-lasting as Harry’s problems, that didn’t mean they weren’t important—but never on this scale. The parents he had loved and the Headmaster he had once trusted and revered were in prison. He’d spent the summer apart from his brother, getting battle training from the elder Weasleys. He was struggling through his first bond with a girlfriend whom, Remus knew, he genuinely liked but who didn’t like Harry much. Today he’d had the war press itself viciously on his awareness, and he’d seen just what Harry was prepared to do for him.

Connor was Connor, untrained to face trouble the way Harry did, by pushing it behind a silent mask and channeling his energy and his magic into helping others. It was not surprising that he needed comfort.

And thank Merlin, Remus found himself thinking, as he studied Connor and saw the lines of grief starting to carve the immaturity off him. Thank Merlin. I love Harry, but I would not wish his training on his brother. Harry lives scarred. He will always carry those scars. Connor might weep now and then, but the tear tracks won’t burn themselves as deep.

“I just felt useless, you know?”

Remus fixed his attention on Connor again, and not on his past. “Why?” he asked softly.

“I—I thought I could do something if I went along.” Connor wiped at his eyes again and then shrugged, crumpling the cloth in his fist. “Use my compulsion, use the spells that Bill and Mr. Weasley taught me, fight the Death Eaters, something. But I only managed to get off a few spells, and those were mostly hexes and jinxes that bounced off the Death Eaters’ Shield Charms. And then I stepped up behind Harry and said his name like a fool, because I was worried about him, and Voldemort tried to fire a spell at me, and Harry got in the way.” Connor stared at the cloth, now knotted around both his hands. “I want to hug Harry. And I want to slap him.”

Remus laughed. "That's a common reaction around Harry, Connor. And I don't think you were a fool. You survived a battle against Death Eaters. It isn't many people my age, let alone yours, who can say that."

"But I got Harry hurt."

Remus sighed. What he might be about to say was harsh, perhaps, but it would free Connor of self-blame, and that was all to the good at this point. "No, Connor. Lily got Harry hurt. I do think that Harry did the best he could with limited time to spare, but she was the one who trained those sacrificial instincts into him. He thinks the best way he can protect you is by endangering his own safety, so that's what he does."

"I wish he wouldn't," said Connor, a harsh expression on his face "It's annoying."

"Yes, it is," said Remus.

"There are times I wish she wouldn't have existed," Connor went on, staring at his feet. "And there are times I'm jealous of Harry, you know? Because I know his life is hard, but he never falters for long. He just keeps going. He does what he has to do to survive, and he also helps other people. I could never do that, even though I'm supposed to." He made a frustrated noise. "And then I see times like today, and I'm so grateful I'm not him that I can't breathe." He stared up from under his fringe at Remus. "Does that make any sense? I'm not sure it makes any sense."

"It does," said Remus. "I don't think you need to be ashamed of either emotion, Connor. Harry is—someone I can admire, someone I love deeply, but not someone I would wish anyone else to grow up to be. He's paid too high a price for what he's achieved. I think he might experience joys the rest of us are never going to know, but he has pains the rest of us are never going to know, too. The way he got his training—" Remus shook his head. If he thought for too long about the abuse, even now, his anger rose, and the wolf with it. "I would rather you were you," he told Connor. "I would rather that Harry was more like you than the other way around."

Connor was quiet for a few moments, before he nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I can see that." He scuffed with his foot at the floor for a second, then said, "I just wonder if I should be more like Harry sometimes. I'm supposed to be a hero, you know? And I don't feel like one."

Remus leaned forward and hugged him. Connor stiffened slightly in surprise, but Remus didn't let him go, though the movement had been impulsive.

"In just over two years," he said softly into Connor's ear, "you've survived possession by You-Know-Who, seen one of your adopted uncles die in front of you, had to revise or reverse truths you've known most of your life, and seen your parents accused of abuse and Harry emerge as someone completely different than who you thought he was. You've come out of that alive, with your sanity intact. I don't know a better beginning for a hero, Connor."

Connor's hands came up and clutched tightly at his shoulders. Remus thought he might cry again for a moment, but he didn't, just sat there holding him. When he drew back at last, his smile was shy, but there.

"Thanks, Remus," he said softly. "I'll remember that. And now I've got to go back to Parvati, or she'll wonder where I got to."

He stood and left. Remus watched him go, some of his own pain gradually melting into peace.

They've both had to suffer, and it isn't fair. But they're both still alive. They both have the chance to change, and to live.
"Draco?"

Draco blinked and lifted his head, groaning as a crick in his neck warned him not to turn too fast. He rubbed it gently as he looked up at Harry. He stared witlessly before realizing Harry was awake.

Draco felt his tongue freeze for a moment; there were so many things he wanted to say that he choked trying to say them all. As it turned

out, that was probably a wise thing. Harry smiled slightly and reached out to clasp his hand.

"I was hoping you would be alone with me when I woke up," Harry said quietly. "There's something I want to tell you. And—" He hesitated, then shrugged and forced the words out as though through a barrier in his throat. "I don't want to say it to anyone else, yet."

Draco felt as though he had stepped into sunlight. There had been a time when he would have adored this sign that Harry valued him above other people. As it was, he knew Harry was capable of giving more, and he wanted that, but this was still pretty damn nice.

"Well?" he prompted, when Harry sat in silence and stared at the far wall of the hospital wing.

Harry spoke without looking at him. His hand, though, remained steady, rubbing small, comforting circles on Draco's knuckles. "Did your father explain to you what Voldemort's curse did?"

"Created a reality so pleasant that you wouldn't want to leave it," said Draco at once. "Yes." He swallowed. He could imagine dozens of realities, or hundreds, better than the one Harry lived with every day. He had been terrified that his father wouldn't be able to bring Harry out, though he hadn't dared show that.

"Did he say what mine was?" And now those green eyes were locked on him, and Draco didn't feel much more comfortable than he would have confronted with a Hungarian Horntail. He shook his head.

Harry closed his eyes. "Good. That's what I wanted to tell you. I thought about keeping it secret, but—well. You keep saying you love me. I think it's about time I trusted that, instead of automatically assuming you'll be disappointed in what I think or feel."

Draco didn't speak. To speak would have been to mess this up. He took Harry's hand in both of his, forcing it to stop its rubbing, and squeezed as hard as he could. Harry tilted his head towards him, and smiled slightly.

"I dreamed about a Hogwarts where I barely existed," Harry said softly. "The war was still happening, but other students went to Connor for reassurance. And he bore it well. He could comfort them without even thinking about it. They came to me when they needed more specific, concrete help, but he was their emotional guide and guardian. The only set of rules I had to remember was the pureblood rituals. When someone walked away after I finished helping him, I knew he wasn't going to demand that I help him in any other way.

"I was happy. Merlin, Draco, I was so happy. You have no idea. I defended and served and protected people, and they smiled at me—and then I slipped away, and they ignored me, or didn't remember that I'd ever been there. No one stared at me. That's what I want, that kind of reality. No Prophet articles, no expectations I can't fulfill, no one interested in seeing my soul, because why would they be interested? Just ordinariness for me. That's what I want," Harry repeated, his voice sinking at the end.

Draco wondered what the hell to say. He felt only revulsion at the thought, and wanted to ask questions. Hadn't he been in the dream-Hogwarts with Harry? Hadn't Harry thought that if someone else wanted to see his soul, they should be able to do that? Didn't Harry have any ambition at all, even for gratitude? How could he lack a thirst to be acknowledged?

Harry took a deep breath, and his next words came out in a rush, like the unfolding of wings. "That's what I want. But I know it's not what I have." He opened his eyes, and Draco wondered what to make of his smile, because it seemed so unnatural, given what he'd just been talking about. "And it's silly to give up everything I have, everything you've given me, for the sake of a fantasy that can't come to pass. I know what I am now—or, well, at least I know it better than I did. I chose to put my life in danger for Connor's, it wasn't a blind sacrifice, but a few minutes after I woke up in the dream, I knew how you'd view it. That's why I couldn't stay there. I've accepted this reality into my blood and bone. Merlin only knows why I've ended up in this position, but the least I can do is try to understand it, not run from it, and try not to let the staring and the seeing flay me from the inside."

He leaned forward, holding Draco's gaze. "And you've said that you love me without the need for me to give something in return. You've said that you won't stop loving me because I make a mistake, or because I show that I'm less than perfect. It's about time that I trusted you to mean that, isn't it? So I told you about the dream. I knew you might not like it, but I wanted you to know. And I love you. I wanted you to know that, too."

Harry's breath was coming a bit faster, and Draco realized he was terrified, though struggling with all his might not to show it. And why wouldn't he be? Pureblood rituals didn't apply here, and Harry, unlike most other children, hadn't been taught any other way of functioning. He had trusted Draco enough to leap off a cliff, but he couldn't be completely sure that there was a bottom to it.

Draco showed him there was by leaning forward and kissing him fiercely. Their kisses to this point had been gentle, chaste, often because Draco worried that he would frighten Harry away if he moved too quickly. Not now. They'd been comrades in battle, they'd both survived, and Harry had shown Draco a proof of love that wasn't a sacrifice. That called for a fierce celebration.

Harry started, but from the way he relaxed a moment later, Draco thought it was from surprise, not fear. Then he made a noise in the back of his throat that might have been a muffled ah!, as though he'd suddenly grasped the solution to a complicated Arithmancy problem, and leaned into the kiss, giving as good as he got. Draco found himself grinning. Harry would hardly be content to sit there like some sort of passive maiden from the old history songs.

Harry did draw back a few moments later, and then shook his head and settled himself. "Thank you," he said.

Draco finally found something to say that didn't sound stupid. "I wish you had more ambition, Harry, but that's not the same thing as hating you for dreaming that dream."

Harry snorted with laughter. "I know that now. Can you believe how long it took me to figure it out?"

Draco stamped out a flare of anger towards the people whose fault that had been. Instead, he murmured, as he watched Harry's eyelids droop again, "Madam Pomfrey said you should stay here a while, for the spell exhaustion if nothing else. Passing that much magic through your body wore you out. Go to sleep. Do you want me to wake you at any particular time?"

"If you're still here when Snape and Regulus both come in," murmured Harry, his words slurring. "I have some things to say to them."

Draco promptly made a resolve to stay awake for that, if he could. The ring of steel in Harry's voice promised an interesting confrontation.

He waited, listening to Harry's breathing until he was certainly asleep. Then Draco leaned back, closed his eyes, and, for the first time in seventeen hours, let himself really believe that Harry's newfound ability to plan was not just a fluke, but the sign of a deeper, more profound, beautiful, and welcomed change.

Chapter Twenty-Five: The Razor Claws of Consequence

Harry woke to a light touch on his shoulder. He opened his eyes, and met Snape's gaze, harsh and unyielding.

Of course it is, Harry thought, and braced himself. He knew at least part of the confrontation that was coming. Snape, from the way he spoke in a quiet, assured voice with anger beneath the surface, didn't.

"Harry. It's Friday afternoon now, and Madam Pomfrey reassures me you have slept enough to be on the road to health. We have much to discuss about your behavior in the battle," said Snape, and sounded as if he believed it—and, more to the point, believed that all the discussion would be on his side. Harry felt his own anger stretch steely wings and uncoil within him. He sat up so that he leaned against the pillows, and squarely met Snape's gaze. He was a Legilimens. He would be able to see Harry's emotions, and read the truth of them.

Snape sat back slightly, staring at him. Harry heard a movement off to the side, and turned to see Regulus in the chair on the other side of the bed. He was just shutting his mouth with a faint click, as if he'd had it open to comment on the interplay between Harry and Snape.

"I know what you saw my gesture to defend Connor as," said Harry. They could start out with rationality and reason, he supposed, though they wouldn't stay there. "I realized it the moment the curse took me. I can tell you it wasn't what it might have looked like. I reasoned out the best course. I took the curse because the loss of my brother would have killed me. And he would have been lost, wouldn't he? No Death Eater cares enough about him to go into his mind and pull him out of a dream-world." He'd awoken again before dawn, before Snape and Regulus came, and pulled the rest of the information on the Mark Mirror Curse from Draco.

"It was still a sacrificial gesture," said Snape. "You could have cast a shield that would have deflected the curse, Harry—"

"When I was so exhausted? Without knowing what the curse was, and how strong I would have to make the shield?"

"You are making excuses," Snape hissed. "You prefer to use your body as a shield. You think of your own flesh, your own will, your own life, as sacrifices to protect your brother."

"You're wrong," said Harry, a little startled at how cool his own voice was. But then, he had known what would happen. "I did work out what might have happened, and decided to take the risk. There were other elements to the decision. I'm magically stronger than Connor. I thought I could likely survive it. He couldn't."

"I cannot believe that, Harry," Regulus said softly. "I spent time in your head, remember? I know how strong your impulses towards sacrifice are—probably stronger than you know yourself. Even when you do have time to work out what you're going to do, you choose that course rather than any other."

"Snape can tell if I'm lying," said Harry, with a jerk of his head at his guardian. "Have him look."

"I would see that you are telling the truth if you believe it to be so, Harry." Snape's voice was infuriatingly calm. Bastard probably had a chance to recover while I was talking to Regulus, Harry thought, and turned around again, determined not to give Snape any more chances like that. "For what it's worth, I agree with Regulus. You made the best decision you thought you could, but it is still not a decision that you should have made. It was a sacrifice."

Harry ground his teeth, and used the noise to calm himself. If I'm violent on my teeth, I don't need to be violent on Regulus and Snape. "It was not. I calculated the risks, I told you. And if I had conjured a shield and the curse struck Connor anyway, then what would you say? That I'd done the right thing? That wouldn't have compensated for the loss of my brother."

"We are not talking about hypothetical situations here, Harry." Snape's voice sounded like grinding ice again, much to Harry's pleasure. "We are talking about what actually happened."

“Except that you want to replace what actually happened with one of your hypothetical situations,” Harry shot back. “Either I should have done something different, or I actually did something different than what I’m saying. You distrust my motives constantly, you know—you think every step I take and every breath I draw comes from some warping my mind took from my abuse. It’s about time that that stopped. I am capable of trust. Ask Draco. And I’m getting sick and tired of not receiving any of it in return.”

“Harry, what are you talking about?” Regulus’s voice was soft and bewildered. Harry didn’t look at him, though, not wanting to back down from his silent staring contest with Snape. “Of course we trust you. But it is true that you refused to acknowledge your abuse for a long, long time. Can you blame us for thinking it does drive more of your behavior?”

“So, fine. Think it.” Harry heard how clipped his own voice was becoming, and didn’t care. He’d started out with the rational explanation, and made no headway. He would have to try the harsher road. “But then I’ll tell you otherwise. And you’ll go right on thinking it does, won’t you? That’s what I mean by distrust. It’s like being thought mad no matter what sense I speak. I am not an invalid. If I say that I’m thinking clearly, then be so good as to accept that.”

“Do you think you would still have done as you did if not for your training?” Snape asked, obviously trying to keep back a snap.

“Yes,” said Harry. “I love my brother. And he’s not the only one I’d risk my life for, not any more. If that curse was heading for you, then I would have done the same thing.”

“That is not what I want to hear.” Snape leaned towards him and spoke softly and intensely. “I want to hear that you value your own life enough to think of another course.”

“My life is mine,” said Harry. “Yes, I’m trying to think of other things that I might accomplish with it. No, I don’t want to mindlessly give it up to save an ant colony. Yes, I know that it might leave other people around me floundering if I died. But I will not, I cannot, consider that

my life is more important than someone else's in the way you mean. I was fairly certain I'd survive that curse. And if I ever have to make a similar decision, and it's between damage to me and near-certain death for someone else, then I'd do the same thing."

Snape shook his head. "You cannot even conceive how much more important you are than your brother, can you?" he whispered.

Harry felt as though someone had slapped him across the face with a fistful of ice shards. He drew back from Snape and turned away, facing Regulus again. He didn't really see him, though. His mind was speaking the words over and over in his head, in numb shock.

I know that he cares more for me than Connor. I know that he doesn't really like my brother. But to say that I'm more important than he is, that my life will always matter more than his does...

And this is the thinking he wants me to share.

"Harry?" Regulus said softly.

Harry shook himself and drew his walls up again with a snap. He had survived Snape's being a git before. He could do the same thing now. And it only gave a stronger push to the half-formed suspicion he'd carried before, that, no matter what his objective need for a guardian was, Snape was not the best choice for the role. He'd sacrificed much to protect Harry, yes, but he could not rule Harry's affections, or his mind, or his thoughts.

"Now I know where you stand," he told Snape, keeping his voice flat and smooth. "Thank you for confirming that."

Snape looked at him oddly. Harry supposed he had no idea what the hell he'd just done. To him, the statement of Harry and Connor's respective values would be a normal part of his thinking, a small statement no more worthy of notice than many other truths that circulated in his mind every day.

To Harry, it symbolized everything that was wrong between them. He breathed through a tight throat, and supposed he should make an

attempt to tell Snape that. Keeping silent out of pride or shame was a bad thing. He had seen that enough in his life. Sirius had died because of it. His parents and Dumbledore had sent Peter to Azkaban because they could not admit to something they had done—something they had even thought was right, but did not believe they could chance anyone else discovering. And Harry wouldn't allow Snape to go away under a misapprehension.

"I'll never think the way you do," he told Snape. "My brother is as important to me as my own safety and well-being are. You and Draco and Regulus are all important." Yes, damn it, even you, he thought, as he watched a brief spasm of emotion cross Snape's face. "But I'm not more important. And now you're going to try to punish me, aren't you, for what you think of as sacrificing my life." He didn't make it a question, because he didn't need to.

Snape's face tightened. "Yes," he said. "But not just for that, Harry. This is a sign of deeper problems that need to be corrected."

Harry felt his fury sink cold claws into his brain. I knew it. The way I think is wrong. The way I am is wrong. Snape wants to change my mind about things. Well, he can't. My actions are one thing. When I endanger other people the way I endangered Draco when I dragged him along in my attack on Voldemort's mind, then I'm wrong. That was stupid. But the way I think is mine. And I know that I made the decision to protect Connor based on the right principles. I know it, even if the two of them won't believe it.

He did shoot a glance at Regulus, to see if he believed differently from Snape. But the half-wry, half-sad smile on his lips as he gazed at Harry told the truth. He believed the same things. He thought that because he'd spent time in Harry's mind, he understood what was "wrong," what needed to be "corrected."

Harry shook his head.

"What?" Snape asked, with a frown at him.

"You don't have the right to punish me," said Harry softly. "I know exactly why I did what I did, whether you believe me or not. I know

that I've changed and healed—not all the way, but enough that I'm on the right road, and I can continue pulling myself forward. I don't need detention or whatever it is that you've got planned for me.”

“Detention for a start,” said Snape. “But it is time when you can speak to me, Harry. You're right. I don't understand what possible motives you could have had for this action beyond self-sacrifice. But if you speak to me, convince me, then you might yet settle my mind and make me admit that you're right.” His face was calm again, damn him, while Harry's fury made it feel as though Voldemort's magic were passing through him once more.

“Why should I have to convince you?” Harry glanced over his shoulder at Regulus. “Why should I have to convince either one of you? I've told you the truth. I know my own mind, I think. I was the only one in my head when I made that decision. I've told you my reasoning, and you haven't accepted it. I don't see why I should spend more time telling you things you refuse to accept.” He turned away from Snape and pulled back the blankets on his bed. He still felt tired, but no more than he would after a hard day of Quidditch practice. He was going back to the Slytherin common room.

Regulus caught his arm. “Harry, we want to understand,” he said.

“I've told you the truth. Understand that.” Harry pulled his arm free.

“We wish to heal you because we care about you.” Snape's voice was frustrated. “I've seen the memories that Dumbledore had of your training, Harry. I know what he did to you. I know—”

“Did it ever occur to you,” said Harry, turning around and throwing the words like knives so that Snape would leave him alone, damn it, “that I'm more than those memories, that I'm more than just an abused child? I could never have recovered as far as I have if that's all there was to my mind. I have my own will, and my own ability to change. I am going to be a leader in this war, and a vates, and many, many other things than a victim. And yet, a victim is all you see, every time you look at me. I'm sick of it.”

"You acknowledge the other things," said Snape, his voice turning harsh. "You do not accept that you were ever a victim, Harry. Have you even spoken to anyone about the abuse you endured, except for your interviews with Madam Shiverwood?"

"You see what happens when I try?" Harry gestured at him. "You assume that's all there is to me. I try to distinguish between the motives my mother gave me and the ones I chose, and you discount my choice entirely."

"Harry—"

He wasn't in the mood to listen to Snape any more. Harry slipped out of the bed and left the hospital wing. His emotions were still cold, very far from the boiling point. It felt rather as though a chill, white mist had filled him, one through which he could see clearly and feel glittering, icicle-edged emotions.

"Mr. Potter."

Harry turned quickly. Charles Rosier-Henlin, who'd been leaning against the wall, straightened from his slouch and nodded to him, then drew a knife. Harry brought up defensive magic before he realized that the knife was his familiar one, with the dark hilt and the blade made of Light, and that Charles was holding it towards him with the hilt first.

"Henrietta Bulstrode found this on the beach after the battle," said Charles, his voice entirely neutral. "She wanted it returned to you."

Harry smiled and accepted the knife, sliding it into his belt. "And she didn't have help in the returning?"

Charles had either a very faint smile or the trick of smiling with his eyes and not his lips, Harry thought. "I wouldn't know, I'm sure." Then he cocked his head. "I was thinking that one of our major problems in this battle is communication. I dislike only former Death Eaters being able to find the man I've sworn myself to follow. I did create a spell some time ago which might solve the problem. I've never spread it around, because I didn't want anyone taking advantage of it. I use it

to communicate with my sons at Durmstrang. Would it benefit you to know this spell?"

"Enormously," said Harry. "What can I do in return—"

"Remain as you are," said Charles fiercely, even as he drew his wand. "Care for your brother. I know why you did that, and it is a motive I can only approve of. Family is important. Be savage, and be fierce, and be free-willed. Do not become a Lord."

Harry let his lips quirk. "I think I can manage that. What is the spell?"

Charles nodded. "It needs to be cast on both of us at first," he said. "After that, you need only to speak the spell with my name in it and it will work." He reached out and tapped Harry's left wrist carefully with his wand. Harry watched his face closely, but he showed no revulsion at the sight of the stump. "Adoro braccio de Harry Potter!"

Harry blinked as an odd tingling ran up his arm. It didn't feel quite like anything he'd sensed before, unless it was a slow lightning bolt. He watched as Charles stepped back and touched his own wrist, this time murmuring the spell with both of their names in it. Then Charles walked around the corner of the hall, leaving Harry feeling a bit silly, just standing outside the hospital wing. He could hear Snape and Regulus arguing quietly inside, and guessed it was the reason that one of them hadn't yet come after him.

A sound of phoenix song came from just above his left wrist. Harry jumped, and realized Charles hadn't told him what to do when this happened. He cleared his throat tentatively, and asked, "Mr. Rosier-Henlin?"

"I hear you, Mr. Potter." Charles's voice was deep and self-assured, and seemed to emerge from just above his left wrist. Harry stared at his stump in fascination. "The bond between us works now. When you cast the spell with my name, I will be able to hear you, at a distance of up to several hundred miles."

Harry nodded, then realized Charles couldn't see him, and said, "I understand. This is fascinating. Where did you come up with it?"

"I studied Muggles for a while," said Charles, even as another slow lightning bolt traveled up Harry's arm and his voice only emerged from around the corner. He stepped back into sight again, looking quite pleased with himself. "I knew that anything a Muggle could do, a wizard could do better, and Muggles have a way of communicating with each other across distances, called telephones. I created a spell that could do the same thing."

Harry hesitated.

"You may share the spell with others now," said Charles, correctly interpreting his hesitation, "as long as you believe that they won't use it against our alliance. I am quite anxious to win this war, Mr. Potter." This time, the smile that showed up only in his eyes was colder. "I lost a nephew to the Dark Lord. My sons are not going to serve him, or to grow up in a world he rules."

Harry nodded. "If you don't mind my asking—well, I thought only powerful wizards could create spells of their own, Mr. Rosier-Henlin, and I didn't feel your strength plunging that deep."

"Concealment spells," said Charles comfortably. "No one alive but my wife and sons knows how strong I am. And it will remain that way for a time, Mr. Potter. I trust you with very many things, but family secrets are private and should remain that way." He paused, his eyes never looking away from Harry's. "I am sorry that yours have been spread all over the papers."

Harry grimaced. "Not as sorry as I have been. It should have been handled privately."

"I have no doubt of that," said Charles, and then bowed. "I will see you again, Mr. Potter. Speak to me every time you have need of something I can do." He strode up the hallway before Harry could think to ask him another question.

Perhaps it was just as well, because Regulus chose that moment to emerge from the hospital wing, and lean against the wall near the doors. He waited for Harry to acknowledge him. Harry didn't. He

started on his way towards the Slytherin common room again, wondering absently where Argutus was. Probably out exploring, he thought. He would have lain still long enough to be boring to the Omen snake, and he was sure Draco would have told him if Argutus had died in the battle.

“Harry.”

Reluctantly, Harry pulled up and let Regulus walk beside him. It was late Friday afternoon, from the angle of the light, and he thought most of the students would be in their common rooms or on the way to dinner, but that didn't mean that he wanted everyone to see Regulus chasing after him. He cast a measured glance up at him. “Well?”

“You realize that both Severus and I care deeply for you?” Regulus scanned his face.

“Yes.” That only made this all the harder, in Harry's opinion. It would have been easy to ignore Regulus and Snape if they were condescending people only doing this for the good of some abstract abused child, or if Snape were acting out of his grudge against James, as Harry was convinced had been the case when he was first Sorted into Slytherin. As it was, he had to listen to them even when he was coldly furious with them, and give them a fair hearing. That didn't mean that he was going to change his mind, or admit that he had been wrong to do what he had done for Connor.

“And I think that you do need to heal more than you've allowed yourself,” Regulus continued softly. “You said that you'd do the same thing again, if it was a choice between damage for yourself and near-certain death for someone else. But what about situations that aren't as desperate? Do you think that you could change your mind about them, and act in different ways?”

“I would try,” said Harry. “But you and Snape would still think that I'm acting from stupid motives.”

“Harry, no.” Regulus gripped his shoulders and sank down in front of him. His eyes were gentle, but not mocking. “It's true that I don't believe you. I've seen how deep the wounds go, remember, even in

your rebuilt mind. But I could come to believe you. And you are certainly allowed to go on reaching for love, for comfort, for the people who love you, outside of battle. That's the reason I wanted to make you my heir—to give you a place, places, to belong, and show you how much I care for you."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "And I don't need houses or money as a proof of that emotion, Regulus. That's why I'm asking you to find another heir. I don't want them."

"Why not?" Regulus persisted.

"I just don't."

"Tell me why."

Harry shook his head, thinking that if he spoke what he honestly felt, he would hurt Regulus—and then he remembered that he was supposed to trust them and speak what he felt, wasn't he? He let out a windy sigh between clenched teeth. "I feel like they're an encumbrance," he said. "I think most possessions are, unless they can actually help me in battle or they mean something to both me and the person who gave them."

"This fits that last category, Harry."

"But it's too heavy." Harry didn't know a better word than that, though it was obvious from Regulus's expression that he didn't understand. "I get uneasy with a few birthday gifts, Regulus. I never cared that much about becoming heir of Lux Aeterna, even. I always assumed James would make Connor his heir. I just don't care. They're not things I value."

"And you think that—"

"I wouldn't make a good heir if I don't value the houses and money and possessions." Harry made an attempt to soften his voice as he saw Regulus's stricken expression. "I value the offer more than I can express, Regulus. But that's not what's needed to take care of a house like Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. And you do have other

people who could accept it, or you might meet someone who could. What you want to give me deserves better care than I would give it."

"You value them, and yet you don't value them." Regulus shook his head. "There's a contradiction in your thinking there, Harry."

"I value them for other people. Not for me."

"You think you don't deserve them?" Regulus cocked his head. "Yes, I understand what you mean about heaviness now. I felt some of that on your birthday. You kept wanting to push the gifts back. You were embarrassed about receiving them at all. You don't think you deserve them, do you?"

Harry hissed between his teeth. "This is silly."

"I don't think so. Not when I still want to make you my heir, Harry."

"I won't accept it."

"I'll make the will." Regulus looked absurdly calm as he rose to his feet. "What you do with them when they pass to you is your affair."

"And if I chose to let Bellatrix have them?"

Regulus gave him a patient look.

"All right, so I wouldn't really do that," Harry admitted, flushing. "And it wasn't even a good lie. But I don't want them."

"Someday, I'll help you figure out why," said Regulus. "I'm not like Severus, Harry, and that's the reason that he sent me out after you. I can be more patient with you, and perhaps I can even convince him that we do need to listen to you instead of just demanding explanations we'll dismiss. Not to mention that I have a better sense of humor, and am far more devilishly handsome." He struck a pose that made Harry's breath unexpectedly catch; for a moment, Sirius was alive all over again.

“I meant what I said,” said Harry, when he could speak. “All of it. About not wanting the houses and the money, and about not wanting to explain to either of you about my motives, when all you do is misinterpret them.”

Regulus nodded, with another patient look. “And we’re both going to be here, Harry, to argue and yell and give you houses, until you realize that we meant it when we said we loved you.”

“I know that—“

But Regulus had ruffled his hair and was setting off up the hall again. Harry scowled at his back, and walked towards the Slytherin common room nursing his wounded dignity.

They still think that I’m suffering consequences of the abuse. Regulus is nicer about it, that’s all. And any promise I make to think things over isn’t going to be good enough, because they’ll still believe that my real motives come from abuse. Harry ground his teeth, and his magic rose and sparked about him until he forced it back under his skin. I’ll just have to show them that they don’t, by showing them how well I’m healing, and that it isn’t due to stupid little talks with Madam Shiverwood.

He reached the door, entered the common room, and almost immediately drew any number of curious glances as he moved across it towards his bedroom. Harry ignored the glances. Yes, so he had gone off and battled the Dark Lord. Big fucking deal. Right now, he had something more important in mind.

He entered the bedroom, and glanced around to find Blaise gone. Good. Now, is Draco here, or—

A rustle in the curtains of Draco’s bed answered that question, and he poked his head out. At once, a smile grew on his face. “Harry! I didn’t know you were awake, or I would have come to the hospital wing myself.”

“That’s all right,” said Harry. “You had to go to classes, didn’t you?”

Draco immediately flopped back on the bed and folded his arms behind his head, snorting. "Yeah. Can you believe it? I want to know why Transfiguration is more important than sitting with you."

"Snape and Regulus were there," Harry said.

Draco turned his head at once, but said nothing. His eyes were intense, though, inviting Harry to talk more.

"It went badly," Harry added, drawing towards the bed. He felt a faint stir of nervousness, given what he was about to ask, but pushed it away. "They simply refused to accept that I really did make a conscious decision, rather than saying, 'Oh, goody, a curse!' and jumping in front of it."

Draco snickered in spite of himself. Harry smiled, and knew it was a fierce smile. "They still think I'm a victim," he said. "And that's all they seem to see. At least, it's the source they trace all my actions back to right now." He cocked his head at Draco. "And I know that's not true, because I'm making efforts to overcome my training. And right now I'm irritated, and I'd like to show them up, and I'd like you to touch me, please."

Draco's mouth fell open. Harry sat down on the bed beside him and took his glasses off, leaning over to drop them on Draco's trunk. "I know it's not necessarily the best motivation," he added. "But I'd like it. Please."

"No need to ask three times," said Draco, his voice gone a little hoarse, and then moved behind him. Harry closed his eyes and waited, trying to relax his shoulders from the tense hunch they'd automatically adopted.

Draco's hands came down on his back. Harry sighed. This didn't feel much different than Madam Pomfrey applying salves to soothe bruises from a Quidditch injury. He thought he could—

And then Draco slipped his hands beneath Harry's shirt, touching bare skin, and began to run them up and down.

Harry shivered.

"I know my hands aren't that cold," Draco murmured.

"Not cold," said Harry, and closed his eyes, trying to hold on to the burst of courage that had driven him here in the first place. He moved a bit, unsure if he wanted to get away or get closer. Draco settled the matter by slipping one hand free, putting his left arm around Harry's chest, and drawing him backwards.

Harry gave a gasp as he abruptly rested against Draco, and tilted his head back. Draco leaned over him, eyes a clear gray, bright with unmistakable pleasure. He really seems to like touching me, Harry thought, and didn't know which emotion was making his head so clouded. But I know something he would like more.

He raised his hand and ran it over Draco's face, then into his hair, stroking awkwardly; this wasn't a good position for him to reach much more than the back of Draco's neck. Draco gave a great huffing breath and went still for just a moment. Harry supposed it did feel good.

He himself wasn't sure what he felt as Draco's fingers worked over his back. It was all right, not cold, warm, and it made his head cloudy. He wasn't sure if it actually felt good—

And then it did, it felt too good, and ingrained instincts made Harry gasp and roll away, pulling free of Draco's arms entirely. "Sorry," he murmured into Draco's sheets, wondering if he should be more apprehensive. He closed his eyes and panted for a moment, willing the pleasure and the misty feeling to go away.

Draco hooked his arms around Harry's waist, in a gesture too old and familiar to be panicking. "That was all right," he said calmly. "Not nearly as much as I wanted, but an excellent start."

Harry swallowed. It was all right. He's not angry. He said he'd push, but he's not going to push me off a cliff.

He was able to sit up and rest his head on Draco's shoulder, before he drew away and said, "What was it like today? Did the others cheer you as a hero of the battle?"

"Half of them don't think that we battled Voldemort," said Draco at once, face flooding with disgust. "Oh, most of the Slytherins know, but there are a bunch of Ravenclaws, with that Parsons bint in the middle of them, declaring that we couldn't have, or we wouldn't have come back alive. I told you to let me hex her, Harry. We—"

Harry relaxed by degrees. It was all right. Draco didn't scorn Harry for being afraid of pleasure the way his mother had trained him to be. It was silly to think he would have. Snape and Regulus might be impossible at the moment, but Draco wasn't, and Harry was a little giddy with the emotions that flooded him at that realization.

And, oddly, that made him all the more determined to shatter this stupid training.

I'm not going to let my mother win. She did this to me, but it serves no purpose anymore, and I don't want it, and Draco doesn't want it. So I'm going to overcome it, and show Draco that I enjoy touching him as much as I enjoy talking to him or fighting beside him. Then I'll have won. We'll have won. So there.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Survival of the Kindest

Snape now remembered why he hadn't cared much about anyone for over a decade. It was because it bloody hurt, that was why.

He stood in his lab, carefully tending an experimental healing potion that was supposed to restore lost bones without the need for Skele-Gro. Behind him, Harry worked in silence, brewing the Wolfsbane required by Lupin and the other werewolves he served with effort they didn't deserve.

It wasn't that extraordinary a scene, Snape thought. It could have happened last year. But last year Harry would have spoken to him, now and then asking about the Dark Arts or saying something about his brother or Draco or how unfulfilling he found his Defense and Charms classes. Now he remained in utter silence, not even expressing an opinion when Snape asked him a question.

It was damn annoying.

And Snape knew exactly what he could say to cure the silence. He had only to tell Harry that he hadn't meant what he said, or that what he had said wasn't what it sounded like. He didn't really believe Connor was more important than Harry. Then Harry would glance at him with a cautious look in his eyes, as if to make sure that he meant that as an apology and not a justification. And he would look a little deeper, and nod, and they would be back on the path to their tentative reconciliation—perhaps even a bit further down the road than they had been the night that Harry came back from freeing the centaurs.

The only problem with that solution was that Snape would have to lie. Harry was more important to him than Connor would ever be, and Harry was more important to the war effort than Connor ever could be. And Harry knew it was the truth. It kept the silence between them poised on a knife's edge.

Snape sliced into an ashwinder's heart, and shook his head. He knew that Harry believed what he had done—saving Connor's life—to be a

calculated decision, not a sacrifice. But Snape did not believe it so, could not believe it so.

Oh, he had tried. Looking into Harry's eyes a few days ago, as he lay in his bed and explained himself patiently again and again, he had used a touch of Legilimency to read the boy's emotions and tried to convince himself of it.

It hadn't worked. Harry had traded one deep-rooted stubbornness—that he needed no healing—for another—that his healing was already complete. He skirted around any mention of his parents. He went pale when he saw the articles in the Daily Prophet that talked about the abuse, but he always read them, with a morbid fascination that reminded Snape of the way that Lucius Malfoy had looked at Muggleborn students in Hogwarts, as if they were another species. He pretended not to see the sharp glances that followed him, the frightened whispers that trailed in his wake. He had made no effort to convince anyone that they had truly battled the Dark Lord after seeing how many of the other students didn't believe him.

Snape was nearly frantic with concern for him. Harry needed to—well, to heal. Snape couldn't put it any better than that. Speak with someone who wasn't that incompetent Shiverwood, or Snape, if that would make him feel better. Stand up for himself. Stop spending so much time and effort helping the people, like the werewolves, like his allies, like the other students, like his brother, like nearly everyone else but Snape and Regulus and Draco, who took from him without giving something back.

They would consume him alive. They wouldn't mean to, but they would push their own anger and fear and need at Harry. And he, who had no barriers, no sense of keeping something for himself, would burn out his own fire trying to reassure and help them. It was a noble goal, but it was one that would destroy him, because the need would never end, but Harry's ability to help would.

Snape knew he could not forbid Harry to help. It would be immoral. And he had no notion of how to restrain the most powerful wizard in the school anyway.

That's one thing the Magical Family and Child Services books never went into, he thought, and stabbed the stem of a thorny rose so hard it split apart. Snape snarled a silent curse and reached for another one. How to raise your child when he's magically Lord-level at fifteen years old and abused and refuses to submit to any of the usual punishments intended for children.

There were always the pureblood rituals, but Snape was reluctant to use them. Yes, he could establish some kind of connection with Harry if he did so, but it would be a connection that pushed Harry further and further away from acknowledging his past and healing like a normal child. He was too used to that way of dancing. He wouldn't achieve any breakthroughs, because the patterns were so familiar, and they would tend to reinforce what he already knew.

Which seemed to leave Snape with exactly nothing, with no more way of helping Harry and keeping him alive than of removing the traps Voldemort had embedded in Regulus's Dark Mark.

It was enough to drive him quite mad.

And then he did think of something he could talk to Harry about, something not mentioned in that first disastrous conversation when Harry had simply blown away his defenses like a whirlwind. Snape grunted. It was worth a try. Anything was worth a try, when he was cornered like this.

"Harry," he said.

He felt the silence snap taut, but when he looked over his shoulder, Harry had his head cocked to one side in a listening gesture.

"Have you thought about what you are going to do concerning your scar connection with the Dark Lord?" Snape concentrated on the mixture in his cauldron. If he turned up the heat just a bit, then it should slowly combine the ashwinder's heart and the thorny rose stem, and that would alter the composition of the potion just enough—if his calculations were correct—to make it restore bones instead of vanish bruises. "I know that he used it to cause you pain during the battle. I think you should shut it."

He turned around when he heard nothing. Harry had actually put his knife down and was staring at him. Snape felt hope in his mouth like dust. At least that was a different expression than the rage backed by steely determination that Harry had shown him every day in Potions class this week.

"There isn't a way to shut it," said Harry.

Snape shrugged. "I grant you that a curse scar binding you to a powerful madman and making you his magical heir is not part of most accepted theories of the mind," he said, as if he discussed this every day. "But Occlumency might work. If nothing else, it would obscure your thoughts and make your mind harder to reach. Of course, that would alert the Dark Lord, but he is already aware of your connection." That he knew for certain, having overheard Harry and Draco discussing it one day. It infuriated him that he had to rely on such measures to learn anything about his ward's life, but he would not let the fury take him. He breathed out instead, and patiently fixed his eyes on Harry's face. "I think it worth a try."

Harry's face took on that particular contemplative expression Snape had learned to fear. He was measuring himself against the needs of others, and the others had always managed to win.

He said that he is thinking now. He said that things are different. Snape grabbed his impatience with both hands and held himself still. Perhaps he will see that shutting this link is the best course for him. It would mean better sleep at night and less danger of dragging Draco into his mind, and he must see how beneficial that would be.

"I don't know all the ramifications of how the link has changed yet," said Harry quietly. "I know that it has changed since his resurrection, at least." He rubbed the stump of his left wrist. Snape wondered if he realized he was doing it. "He sent me a vision much more like a dream than the normal ones to alert me of the attack on the Weasleys, and the same kind of vision to show me the beach. I think those are under his control. And I can't affect people or things in the visions anymore. I've tried. Once, I managed to kill Nagini, but now I can't touch anything."

“Those sound like arguments in favor of shutting the link,” said Snape. “Then he cannot hurt you.”

Harry shot Snape an irritated glance. “And we would lose valuable information on the war,” he said. “It’s true that I mistook the place of his last attack, but that was my own stupid fault. At least we did know there was going to be an attack on the autumnal equinox, and it wasn’t a complete surprise. I have to have the link open.”

Snape picked up his wand and waved it at the cauldron, lowering the flame to a simmer. He was going to keep his fury out of his voice, he really was, but he had to strive hard to achieve that. This was his old fury at Lily Potter, or tried to his rage at her. All Harry said now was a direct consequence of her training. “And the ill effects on your health mean nothing to you?”

Harry’s gaze sharpened. “Here we go again,” he said, with a disgust so deep in his voice that Snape actually flinched. “You’re going to say something about my life being more important than—what this time? Being prepared for the war, maybe? The lives of my allies?” He shook his head and snorted. “I thought you would at least approve of this decision, since I’m making it out of concern for the war and not for my brother. But it would be too much to ask for your approval right now on any topic, I see.” Snape could hear the pain underlying his voice as he glanced away, another emotion Harry hadn’t shown much of in the past week.

“Harry.” Snape used his gentlest tone, both because he needed it right now, and because Harry would find it harder to block that out. “I meant what I said. I do consider you more important than your brother, yes—important to me. I did not mean that I believe Connor—the name felt strange on his tongue—should have died in your place. I meant that you should find methods that would preserve both your lives. And I mean you to concentrate on offensive strategizing in this war, not defensive. I wish you to care more about yourself. You are not only a war leader, not to me. But even if I thought of you that way, then yes, I would think your health more important than any one piece of information.”

Harry shut his eyes. Snape could see a fine tremor making its way through him. He could only wait. Harry would turn to him, or he would not.

Harry turned away instead.

Snape shut his eyes. Then he heard Harry say, "I've finished the Wolfsbane Potion. I'm taking the vials to the Owlery with me, to send to the werewolves who need it—and several to Remus, of course. Good night, sir."

When the door to the lab had shut, Snape opened his eyes, and sighed. So now he's decided to turn non-confrontational. But that won't solve our problems, any more than it will solve his lingering abuse.

Glancing by habit at Harry's work area, Snape paused when he realized the boy had left one vial behind. He swept over to pick it up, secretly glad to have the opportunity to pursue Harry and call him back.

He paused when he held the glass tube, however. The potion within didn't have the color or consistency of Wolfsbane. In fact, it looked much more like the most common healing potion for bruises, the kind that Madam Pomfrey was always running out of in the hospital wing.

Come to think of it, there had seemed to be several extra vials of the potion in Snape's cubby this week.

He was mystified for only a moment. Then he just barely resisted the temptation to break the vial against the worktable.

Harry was making him the healing potions—a tedious task Snape preferred not to have to do himself, for all its necessity—in return for Snape's letting him use the ingredients for Wolfsbane. He was doing it so that he wouldn't owe his guardian anything.

Harry, quite literally, seemed to want nothing from him.

Harry could feel his shoulders tense as he walked into the meeting of the dueling club, now held in one of the abandoned classrooms. It

was pouring down rain outside, more than enough reason to stay in. But this classroom was full of people staring at him.

And that's different from the rest of Hogwarts, how? Harry put up his head and pasted a deliberately haughty expression on his face, taking time to meet the eyes of the students who sat in a semicircle of desks nearest the front—all of them closer friends than half the people here. Hermione gave him a small smile. Connor, hand-in-hand with Parvati, also smiled, though his girlfriend didn't. Neville, with dirt still under his fingernails from helping Professor Sprout in the greenhouses, waved. Millicent gave a single firm nod.

And then Draco was there, striding up to Harry's side with a glance that asked not, "Am I late?" but "How could you have started this early, without me?" Harry felt himself relax completely. He moved closer to Draco, asking without words, and received a gentle brush on his shoulder from one hand already outstretched to touch him.

You knew this was going to happen, Harry thought, a more rational, bracing thought than he'd been able to have when Draco wasn't there. You had to have known it from the day the negative newspaper stories began.

And he had known it, he could tell himself now. He still didn't know exactly who "Argus Veritaserum" was. But he had known the mysterious reporter had it in for him, and he had known that, at some point, he would claim that the accusations of child abuse against Harry's parents and Headmaster Dumbledore were completely made up, without foundation—that Harry had in fact turned on his loving guardians, the ones who had tried to stop him misusing his magic from such a young age, out of spite and inherent tendencies towards becoming a Dark Lord.

It was only a story, Harry reminded himself. It wasn't true. The people who believed it to be true must have their reasons for doing so, and he couldn't blame them for having those reasons. The mere thought of falsely accusing someone of child abuse made him flinch. For that matter, the thought of what could happen to Dumbledore and his

parents with the accusations being true made him want to curl up into a ball a few times each day.

He had no reason to feel as though there were a lead weight pressing on his chest each time he met someone's eyes and saw questions about the truth there. He knew the truth. What did it matter? Why was he letting the stares and the whispers and the outraged hisses get to him?

Well, he didn't know why he was, but it would have to stop. He had a dueling lesson to begin, and today they were starting Dark Arts.

He waited a few more minutes, both to listen to Draco's quick recitation of an amusing incident at dinner after Harry had left and to make sure no one else would show up. He noticed that Margaret Parsons, who sat in the back of the room, was watching him with less animosity than usual. In fact, she grinned at him several times, and burst into giggles with her friends more than once. Harry shrugged it off. Perhaps she'd decided that the story in the Prophet today was funnier than anything.

At last, he decided that some of the regular attendees were either busy or hadn't got permission from their parents to be in a class where Dark Arts were practiced, and held up his hand. The door swung itself shut and locked. A few students began murmuring anxiously, but Harry silenced them with another gesture, though that one had no magical force behind it.

"I'm about to show you a few Dark curses," Harry said softly. "I don't want them to get into the corridor, either on purpose or deflected, and I certainly don't want anyone hurting anyone else." He glanced at Remus, standing casually in a corner. Remus smiled back, reassuring him he was doing all right with his introduction to the Dark Arts so far. Relieved he was there to heal anyone who did get injured, Harry returned his gaze to his students. "Remember what Professor Merryweather says about these types of curses. Some of the defense against them has to come from inside. If you take too much pleasure in them, surrender your will too completely, then it won't matter if you deflect them when an opponent hurls them at you. They'll still infect you with the desire to practice more and more."

"I'm sure you know that intimately, don't you, Potter?" Susan Bones asked, frowning at him.

Harry simply gazed back at her without answering, until Susan lowered her eyes and blushed. Harry let out a calming breath, and told himself it wasn't Susan's fault. She must be under a lot of stress now that the Second War had begun. She had lost her grandparents and her uncle and cousins to Death Eaters during the First War. And one of the Death Eaters arrested for complicity in the death of her uncle Edgar Bones—though of course, he had escaped prosecution by convincing the Wizengamot he was under the Imperius Curse at the time—had been Lucius Malfoy, whose son was standing unconcernedly at Harry's side this very moment.

It's all so very complicated, and I can't make it worse. If I want them to accept what I believe, and that it is possible for Dark wizards to actually work against the Dark Lord, I have to accept what they believe. They have their own minds, their own free wills. I can only try to convince and persuade people to follow me, not compel them.

"The first curse I'm going to show you is *Ardesco*," said Harry. A few of the students flinched, but Harry shook his head. "I won't cast it at any of you," he promised, and then concentrated. A wooden figure, vaguely human-shaped, appeared in the center of the classroom, well away from the desks, and then wards snapped into place around it, the locked chain of Shield Charms that Harry could now perform with barely a thought, to contain the curse in the area with the figure. "I'm only going to show you how to perform it."

He picked up his wand, and this time Margaret Parsons laughed aloud. Harry glanced at her. Margaret just looked back at him, eyes sparkling. "You're using a wand, Potter?" she asked. "You really like pretending that you're the same as all the rest of us, don't you? The rest of us who don't have to make up stories about being abused by our parents and fighting the Dark Lord to get attention?"

"Miss Parsons," said Remus, and Harry heard the werewolf in his voice. "Such language is unwarranted."

"You'd say that," said Margaret, "because you're his godfather, and a Dark creature. But—"

"Leave," Harry told her.

Margaret shook her head. "I don't want to. You locked the door."

"I can unlock it." Harry flicked a glance at the door, and willed it so, and the door stood open. "Go away. I don't think that anyone has the right to say such things to Remus."

Margaret sighed. "Potter, you can't take a joke," she said. "I'm sorry, all right? I'm not used to thinking of werewolves as people. I'm sorry, Professor Lupin," she added to Remus in a singsong.

Harry flicked a glance at Remus. He wasn't the one she'd tried to insult, after all. It was up to Remus to say if she could stay or not.

Remus bared his teeth, but nodded. He feared his own anger, Harry knew. He would control himself better than Margaret could be expected to control herself. But that was the way it had to be, Harry told himself firmly. Remus was an adult, and she was a child. He had the power to hurt her, to punish her, but that didn't give him the right to do it if she was only acting out of childish impulse.

Harry then put an arm out sideways, not even looking at Draco, and forced down his wand.

"Don't hex her, Draco," he said. "She's not worth it. And you know that she can't hurt us, and how volatile Slytherin's relationship with Ravenclaw is right now." An entirely unprovoked attack on Montague in the corridor that morning had proven that. "I don't want this to be the incident that sparks off a war between the Houses. Remus said it's all right, so it is."

"It's what she said about you. I want to hurt her."

Harry turned his head sharply at that. When he looked into Draco's eyes, he could see Lucius. And Harry had good cause to know just

how vengeful Lucius Malfoy was. He shook his head frantically and leaned towards Draco.

“Draco, please,” he whispered. “I’m all right, too.”

“You’re not,” said Draco. “You’re not, and she’s making it worse, and I want to hurt her. She needs to suffer, Harry.” He didn’t speak loudly, and not even with much anger. There was simply a manic determination on his face.

The problem with having a possessive, protective, vengeful boyfriend, Harry thought, is that he finds it a little harder to forgive people for being children. “I don’t want her to.”

Draco snarled. Just in case, Harry added the shimmering, almost invisible line of a ward between him and Margaret, and then turned back to the figure in front of him. He locked the door again, lifted his wand, and said, “I’ll say the incantation and make the wand movement slowly. Then I’ll demonstrate the actual curse.”

He performed the slow demonstration, hearing the scratch of a quill as Hermione scribbled down notes on the movement. Then he faced the figure, snatched up a bit of his anger to funnel through the curse, and said, “Ardesco!”

The wooden figure burst into intense flames, consuming itself from the inside out. It went even faster than it usually did. Harry blinked, realizing that his rage must have done the curse good. But then, Dark Arts usually benefited from wild emotions.

He turned and faced his audience, seeing the shaken look on Hermione’s face. And Parvati’s face, for that matter, and others’. They were probably thinking about what that incantation could do to a human enemy. Well, good. I don’t want them using these spells casually. “The Intense Flame curse is a good one to begin with,” he said, “because it can’t bounce, so there’s less chance of hitting a classmate with it, unless you point your wand at them. It consumes from the inside, as you saw, instead of flying in a straight line of fire.” He glanced from face to face, and drove the point home, just in case

they didn't get it. "It kills painfully, and almost instantly. Your enemy, if you hit them, often has no chance to resist."

They watched him in silence. Even Margaret's laughter had ceased, for the moment. Then Neville stood up.

"Can I try it, Harry?" he asked quietly.

Harry smiled despite himself. This is the reason he went into Gryffindor. Neville had more reason to hate the Dark Arts than most, since Bellatrix Lestrange had tortured his parents into insanity, but he was volunteering to show that the spells were nothing to be afraid of and reassure the others. Harry nodded encouragingly at him and conjured another wooden figure in the nest of wards, then moved aside so that Neville could take his place.

Neville stared at the wooden person for some moments. Harry watched his expression change, clouds taking over his usually pleasant face until it was an expression of absolute and utter determination. He wondered who Neville was imagining as his foe. He privately hoped it wasn't Snape.

Neville aimed his wand at the figure. "Ardesco!" he said, the first two syllables firmly, the last with a little tremble in his voice.

Fire bloomed, blue-white and consuming, from the figure's chest region. It charred only the chest and head before fading, but Harry was impressed. It was more than he had expected anyone in the class to manage tonight, except possibly Millicent, Draco, and a few others who had been around Dark magic from the time they were children.

More interestingly, he had felt Neville's power, usually burning at just about average level, soar up around him with dazzling intensity when he cast the spell. Then it fell back. Harry nodded. That's why he doesn't do well in Potions. He's a lightning wizard—quick burning strikes are his style, powered by emotion. Of course, he's good in Herbology, but there he has love to sustain his interest. If all he feels is nervousness, like he does in Potions, then he'll mess up instead,

because his magic tries to help him but doesn't have enough intensity to work with.

"Very good, Neville!" he said, and Neville beamed at him shyly. "Excellent." Harry created another two figures, one off to the side and one slightly in front of the first one, and urged Neville off to stand before the second. "Why don't you practice on that, and I'll need another volunteer to try and cast *Ardesco* again?" He looked around inquiringly.

Hermione rose to her feet in interest, but Margaret spoke before she could say anything. "Oh, I was supposed to wait longer, but I just can't."

Harry looked at her warily. If she was finally participating, then he had to give her a chance—

And then he realized that she'd stooped down and picked up something from the floor. Harry blinked. It looked to be a box of the kind that non-volatile Potions ingredients were usually shipped in. He didn't understand until Margaret removed the box's lid and picked up something from within it.

It was Argutus, with his mouth bound to his tail in what looked to be an intensely uncomfortable position.

"I found him spying in my room," said Margaret. "I thought I'd bring him back to you, Potter." She smiled at him. "Don't worry. I didn't hurt him—not nearly as much as you hurt Headmaster Dumbledore, at any rate."

Harry choked, his rage rising in him so suddenly that he couldn't breathe. He clenched his hand in front of him. He saw Draco edge closer with a faint look of intoxication on his face, and realized his magic must be rising around him. A few people looked fearful, but Margaret was too far gone in the bliss of her little plan to be one of them.

"Give him here," said Harry softly.

“I want you to promise that you’re never going to send him spying in the Ravenclaw girls’ bedrooms again.” Margaret dropped the box and picked up her wand, touching it to the ropes that bound Argutus. She murmured what Harry could just make out as a Constriction Spell, and the ties grew tighter. The little Omen snake couldn’t even thrash. “What were you having him do, Potter? Look for dirty little secrets that you could file more false charges about?”

“Miss Parsons.” Remus’s voice sounded very far away through the haze of Harry’s anger. “I would advise you to give his snake to Mr. Potter. Now.”

“I just want a promise, that’s all. I think he shouldn’t even have the snake, really. It’s against school rules. But, of course, Harry Potter gets to be the exception to all the rules. He even gets to attend Hogwarts after he’s forced the best Headmaster in history out.” Margaret gave Harry a sweet smile. “Come on, Potter, a promise, what do you say? I’d hate to have to cast a pain curse on your precious little snakeling—” She raised her wand as if she were going to do just that.

“Exsculpo,” Harry snapped. “Wingardium Leviosa. Silencio. Accio Argutus.”

The jet of purple light that sprang from his hand made the ropes binding Argutus cease to exist in the next moment. Then Argutus was floating, so that Margaret couldn’t drop him to the floor, and Margaret’s voice was silenced, and Argutus was skimming towards Harry, landing safely on his shoulder.

Harry turned his head so that he could focus on the Omen snake. “Did she hurt you?” he demanded.

“Tied me up and made me miss my meals, mostly.” Argutus twisted back and forth, as though trying to get rid of the memory of the ropes. “But I am sore and hungry, and she said some of the words in the language my name is in. They hurt me.”

Harry closed his eyes. He wanted so badly to wound Margaret. What she did to him didn't matter, he could survive it all, but that she had hurt Argutus, a tiny snake who wasn't even venomous—

He wanted to hurt her, he wanted her to cease to exist, and he knew that he had the power to do it, too.

And if he used that power, what was going to make him any better than Voldemort?

He could feel the press of eyes on him, sympathetic and fascinated and frightened, and he gave a little sob. The gazes, combined with the sheer force of his temper, were going to push him over the edge in a moment, and Margaret might find herself writhing under the Cruciatus, for all Harry knew. He'd cast it against Voldemort in the graveyard.

Desire and will rushed together, and formed a new spell, the one he needed at the moment—to make him safe, to make the others safe from him.

“Extabesco plene,” he gasped, and felt the walls of the spell rise up around him, wrapping him in wind, making him vanish. He was still there, of course, but he was hidden—not just from sight, as an Invisibility Cloak or Disillusionment Charm would do, but from all the senses. No one could hear him or feel him, and Remus wouldn't be able to track him by scent. And his magic was under the spell with him, wrapped and turned inside out. Not even its pounding power would reveal him.

Harry brushed past Draco's reaching hand, ducked, and ran through the suddenly open door.

He aimed by instinct for the areas of the school where few people would be at this hour, after dinner on a weeknight, and finally found another abandoned classroom. He slipped inside it and leaned against the wall, his eyes closed, his head thrown back. His panting shook him.

He'd almost lost control.

He'd almost hurt another student.

He was sick with himself, and furious, and frightened—especially because the soft twining of Argutus around his neck made him dream all over again about injuring Margaret, making her feel exactly the pain that Argutus had felt, returning curse for curse.

He wished with all his heart in that moment that his dream were real, and he could just be assured that no one would come looking for him unless they actually needed help. He could vanish, for hours at a time. No one would worry. He'd slip in and out of the world, using his magic only for good things, and he would understand everything.

Harry opened his eyes and regarded the shimmer of his magic, visible since it was trapped in a small space with him, with what he knew was a look of loathing. "What good are you," he whispered, "if you can be used to hurt other people like that?"

"Sometimes a short, sharp shock can be most beneficial, Mr. Potter."

Harry whipped his head around, and his magic moved with it, solidifying into an arrow that Harry had to struggle to keep from flying. Acies Lestrangle was standing in the door of the classroom, staring straight at him.

"How can you see me?" Harry demanded. He was counting on his new spell to shelter him, but it was no good if it didn't work.

"You cannot fool a dragon's eyes, Mr. Potter." Acies walked across the room and sat down on a desk. She wore a fringed cowl about her face, and did not try to meet his gaze. Harry didn't even know for certain if she was looking at him now, or at a corner of the room. She spoke absently. "And you cannot fool my family's sense of power. I know what happened."

"What I almost did?"

"Yes." Acies tilted her head. "Would it have been so terrible?"

Harry choked. "Of course it would have," he said, when he could speak. "I would have hurt her, and she—she couldn't defend herself. It wouldn't have been an equal contest." He leaned his head on his knees and closed his eyes.

"You smell of so much pain," said Argutus softly. "I don't like it when you smell of so much pain."

"She fights very well on a plane where you will not even try to defend yourself, that of insults and public opinion," said Acies. "If you had shocked her or hurt her badly enough, Mr. Potter—note that I do not advocate killing her—then she would have backed off."

"And then she would have hated me even more." Harry wondered why in the world Acies, a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, was telling him this. "I don't want to be the one who strikes the spark that starts the wildfire, Professor Merryweather."

"Something will be, if you are not." Acies's voice were pensive. "I do not know why the reaction towards you is so deep, Mr. Potter. Sometimes I think I know, and then it slides from my mind. I will keep trying to guess." Then she shook her head. "As it is, she will not remember that you held back from using pain curses on her. She will remember only that you startled and nearly hurt her. She will feel the need to prove herself, or she will grow bold from thinking that you don't dare provoke a confrontation, and she will increase her torment."

"I can't hurt her," Harry whispered. "And I can't allow Draco or Snape or anyone else who cares about me to hurt her, either."

"Why not?" Acies's voice was polite, mildly interested, as if this were a matter of academic interest to her.

"Because of the same principles that you've given us, of course, Professor." Harry frowned at her. "Because we need to understand and respect other people's sacrifices. The loss of Headmaster Dumbledore was a sacrifice for her family and for her. She's only acting like this because of that. How can I blame her for that?"

“Defending yourself and blaming her are two different things.” Acies leaned forward. “It is not often used, because to do so would spark rivalries between powerful students that Hogwarts does not need, but there is a stricture in the books of the school that gives professors a certain—ability. I grant you formal permission to defend yourself with magic outside of class, Mr. Potter. What you do with that permission is up to you.”

Harry closed his eyes. “You shouldn’t be showing favoritism like that, Professor Merryweather.”

“I am not the Head of a House,” said Acies. “More, I am the Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts, which already has a relaxation of rules associated with it. This is not favoritism, Potter. This is the removal of a restriction that will let you carry the battle to a field where I know you excel.”

“But I should learn to be more patient—“

“There is a certain point,” Acies interrupted him, “at which patience, forgiveness, mercy, forbearance, are all weaknesses, Potter—invitations to your enemies to do whatever they like, under the sure and certain knowledge that you won’t strike back. I believe this permission will prevent confrontations. I will have the Headmistress announce it tomorrow. It will give students a reason to think twice before attacking you, verbally or magically. And if you ignore your own emotions and instincts long enough, the explosion, when it comes, will be more violent. You saw that today.”

Harry sighed. He still didn’t like it, since it was a privilege that elevated him above others, but he didn’t think he had the energy to persuade Acies out of it right now. And maybe she was right, and it would prevent people from getting into confrontations, which would insure that he wouldn’t hurt them.

“You are like me, Potter,” Acies said, making him look up. “As much magical creature as wizard. Lords, or those with the power to become so, often are. Your magic needs to be exercised, trained, controlled, used. It is a part of you as much as your limbs and your eyes, rather than something extra, as it is for some wizards. Better to use it in

constant small spells rather than dam it up and have it come out in a flood.”

Harry nodded. Snape had told him something similar during the summer between his second and third year, when his magic had first begun bursting free of the phoenix web.

He was sick of thinking and talking about himself, though, and he asked, “What do you mean, like you?”

Acies cocked her head. “Why, I have the dragon within me, Mr. Potter,” she said. “The wildness. It begins to burn and beg for release if I ignore it too long. And yet, each time I use it, the balance in my mind slips a little more, and the dragon becomes a little stronger.” She stood up and walked towards the door.

“What happens when the balance tilts from human to dragon?” Harry asked her back.

Acies glanced over her shoulder. “Then I will not come back,” she said gently, and shut the door behind her.

Harry closed his eyes. His magic hummed around him, and Argutus asked for crickets.

Like it or not, I can’t just fade. The spell is a nice compromise for when I absolutely need it, but Draco will be frantic about me, and Remus and Connor will be worried. And Snape, too, I suppose.

Harry sighed, and dismissed the cocoon of spells around him. His magic at once uttered a trilling song of freedom, gliding around him so happily that Harry shook his head.

I suppose I really haven’t used it enough lately. Draining Voldemort’s power is passive enough not to count.

Harry took several deep breaths, then rose to his feet and turned to seek out Draco. Perhaps Acies was right, and the ability to use magic to defend himself if necessary would make larger spells unnecessary.

Harry could think of something that would be even better as far as exercising his impatient magic, though.

Time to take the battle with Voldemort on the offensive.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Becoming Conscious

Harry went up on his broom early the next morning, long before anyone else awoke, long before Draco would have a reason to expound on revenge plans against Margaret that Harry was determined not to honor.

He had to think, and the sky was the best place for it. Harry rose steadily, his hand and legs locked around the Firebolt. His magic hovered around him. If he slipped due to his lack of a left hand, it would be ready to aid him, but Harry didn't think he would slip. He wasn't chasing a Snitch, after all, and had no reason to stretch out his right hand to grasp at the air.

He soared until he was gasping, the thin, cold air cutting at his cheeks. Then he turned and glanced down at the bulk of the castle, the Forbidden Forest—an undifferentiated dark mass at this point—and the Quidditch Pitch. Several thousand feet below him, Harry thought, dizzily. The problems in Hogwarts still existed, of course, but their presence in his mind felt diminished, as though the size of the sky were eating them, even as distance ate the buildings that loomed over him when Harry walked among them.

He had to think. Here, where he was alone and the sky sang around him and the muted exhilaration that always came with flying gripped him, was the best place.

Harry closed his eyes, leaned out along his broom, and began to circle. He murmured a warming charm to protect himself from the cold air when that got to be distracting, forcing his thoughts to turn to inner and not outer discomfort.

What did he have to do?

Well, one thing was fairly obvious. Something about Margaret. Remus had taken one hundred fifty points from Ravenclaw for fighting, tormenting another student's pet, insulting a professor, and acting irresponsibly in a room where Dark Arts curses were being used. Harry thought that might restrain Margaret for a short while, but in the end, it wouldn't be enough—not if fear of Harry's magic hadn't

held her back so far. And her Housemates had laughed with her yesterday, not stood up to her, so they were unlikely to be much help, either.

A short, sharp shock, Acies said.

Harry sighed. And the shock would most likely have to be magical, he knew—both because of the permission for him to use magic in his own defense that Acies would get McGonagall to announce today and because he doubted that Draco and some of the other Slytherins would be satisfied with less than a magical revenge. He'd heard Millicent and Blaise discussing it last night when he finally returned to the common room, though of course they shut up immediately when they saw him. They would defend him unless he showed that he was capable of defending himself.

What kind of spell would make her back off instead of just find some other way of getting at me? I can't shield everyone. If she can't go after Argutus or Draco, she'll just go after another of my friends, and there's no way to predict who she'll choose beforehand.

A progressive spell was the best course to take, Harry decided at last, one that would advance in stages as Margaret failed to restrain herself. If she hurt him once, only one thing would happen; if she hurt him twice, then the second thing would, and so on. And it had to be something that would embarrass her, rather than physically hurt her. The mere thought of using pain curses or Transfiguring her into a stone statue the way Voldemort might have made Harry squirm as though his stomach were on fire.

What, then?

And then it occurred to him, and Harry blinked and smiled a bit. Well, yes, that would be very hard to hide or disguise as anything other than what it is. And I'll only need to use it if she attacks me. If she's learned her lesson, or all her Housemates pile on her and keep her still, then it can stay safely in my head.

That decided, Harry moved his mind reluctantly on to the next topic he thought he had to deal with—Snape.

After several minutes of uphill struggle against his instincts, Harry had to admit that the man might have a point. Could he learn anything more from the scar connection? Harry didn't know. Since the battle, he'd had nothing but visions too brief and blurred to be useful, or ordinary dreams—most of them repeats of the Hogwarts where he was happy. Voldemort almost certainly didn't want Harry able to find and follow him while he was as severely wounded as he was. Harry could perhaps delve further into the link, but he didn't know how to do that without dragging Draco along.

A one-sided barrier would be the best solution, then, one that I can take down if I need it but which he can't get through.

Harry grimaced and opened his eyes, to watch a gull making its way through the air far below. His greatest strength in Occlumency lay in shielding his own emotions, calming himself and letting his rational thinking take over—probably a legacy of the box. He had never tried something like Voldemort's snake, a trap that would block a hostile mind with a permanent link to his from entering. He would have to have Snape's help if he was going to do this.

Do I want that help?

It didn't matter if he wanted it. He would have to get it. Harry twitched his head irritably. And that meant he had to come to some kind of understanding with Snape.

Perhaps I did mistake him. Maybe. I thought he was saying I was worth more as a human being than Connor is, which is so ridiculous it doesn't deserve a rational argument. But maybe he did mean that I was more important to him and the war effort. I can see that. It would fit with what he was saying when I brewed the Wolfsbane. And if Connor is going to be the one to defeat Voldemort—well, I hold that as a possibility, but Snape probably doesn't. He knows more about my skills and my readiness to fight the Dark Lord than he does about Connor's.

Perhaps I should ask him to give Connor lessons?

Harry snorted, but kept the thought in mind. Snape was still the professor at school who knew the most about Dark Arts—well, perhaps Acies knew more, but she so far was concentrating more on the philosophy of them, the internal defense against falling into temptation, than the outer defense against specific spells. And for all Harry knew, she'd refuse to tutor Connor, because Acies was like that.

He won't like it. I'll have to persuade him, maybe, or offer to do something for him. But I think I at least need to ask. Connor felt so useless in the battle. Harry winced at the thought of the expression on his brother's face when he'd first seen him last weekend. Connor had smiled stiffly and thanked him for jumping in front of the curse, but the deep sense of helplessness in his eyes was one that Harry could empathize with. I'll ask Snape.

Well, he meant to make many requests that weekend, including that any of his allies who had useful information about a possible Death Eater location tell him what that information was, so that they could plan an offensive attack on Voldemort. This could be part of the general deluge of requests.

And that left the crawling problem that he'd been trying not to think about, the thing that should not have been a problem but was. That was the weighty sense of outrage and anger he'd felt about the Daily Prophet article yesterday, and Margaret's insults, and the murmurs in the corridors, and all the other little things he shouldn't have let bother him, but which did bother him.

He knew what Snape would say, could hear the dry suggestion echoing in his head. Go talk to someone.

Harry shook his head impatiently. Who was there to talk to? Remus and Snape and McGonagall knew everything; it wasn't like Harry could say anything new to them, and McGonagall was doubly restricted by the fact that she was Headmistress of the school and couldn't be seen as favoring just one student. Nor did he want to make them relive what his parents had done to him, or subject Remus to more ugly reminiscences of two of his best friends.

Use Occlumency to help in that too, then. I think I'm only being affected the way I am because of that abrading I took from Voldemort's mental venom. Heal myself, get myself under control again, and the pools should swallow my emotions. I'll get through this alive. I've taken worse. And I'm sick of thinking about myself all the time. If I can concentrate on planning an offensive attack and getting Snape to train Connor, it will be better.

He closed his eyes and gently expanded his Occlumency pools, overwhelming the boiling chaos in his mind under a cool tide. He had to wrestle for perhaps twenty minutes, since emotions kept popping up and poking through the surfaces of the pools, but finally, he opened his eyes, calm and as near relaxed as he'd get.

A thought came to him. Harry indulged himself in it.

Why not? There's no one there to see.

He pointed his Firebolt at the ground and dived straight down.

The wind rushing past him built to a roar with his speed, and the warmth steadily increased as he came lower and lower, into the air stroked by the rising sun's rays. The sky tumbled past him, blue and gray and polished to a sharp sheen with the rain that had fallen yesterday. Harry heard himself laughing. The joy surged through him, a light mist floating on top of the Occlumency pools, not one of those emotions he needed to restrain.

Only when he pulled out of the dive and circled lazily a few feet above the ground did he realize that someone had been watching him after all. Hawthorn Parkinson stood near the school's front doors, her hood pulled back and her eyes fixed on him. Harry could feel himself tense, but he shoved the worry back under the surface of the Occlumency pools as well. He nodded at her as if he did death-defying dives all the time, and then pulled his Firebolt to a stop and hopped off it.

"Hello, Mrs. Parkinson," he said quietly. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Hawthorn opened her mouth, then visibly changed what she was about to say. "Yes, Harry. I have information that you'll be interested in—the probable location of one of the camps where the Dark Lord is keeping his captive Muggles. And I brought some people with me whom I think you should meet." She gave a nervous little flick of her shoulders. Harry cocked his head. I don't look that intimidating with my cheeks flushed from diving and my hair tousled, do I?

"I'd be very interested in that, yes," he contented himself with saying. "I was about to contact you and the others and tell you that I think it's time we took this war on the offensive instead of the defensive. A raid of that kind would be perfect." He looked around, but he didn't think that the others were standing at Hawthorn's side under Disillusionment Charms, or he would already have seen them. "Where are these people you want me to meet?"

Hawthorn lifted her head and gave an odd sound, half-yelp and half-howl. Shadows stirred towards the edge of the Forbidden Forest a moment later, and six people emerged.

Harry knew three of them, he realized after a quick glance: Tybalt Starrise, his joined partner John, and Laura Gloryflower. The other three, two women and a man, were strangers.

But all three of them, Harry saw as they came closer, were werewolves. Their eyes, darkened almost to the color of amber, proclaimed it, as did their half-flared nostrils. And then, of course, he knew who they must be: the three children of Light families whom Fenrir Greyback had bitten, the three werewolves he'd been brewing Wolfsbane for.

Harry bowed slightly to the male stranger. "Fergus Opalline?" he asked.

The man nodded, a faint smile curling the edges of his mouth. He had a wild shyness that reminded Harry of Remus, or at least Remus as he had been before the Sanctuary. His hair was pale, a white-blond color that reminded Harry of the Malfoys'. Harry decided to keep any remarks on that resemblance to himself, and glanced at the two women.

One looked too similar to Laura not to be related to her. Her hair was a cloud of golden curls, and she had bells braided in and among them that marked her as a trained war witch. Harry stared in open curiosity, certain there was a story there; she was only in her early twenties, and training like that normally took more than a decade. "Delilah Gloryflower?" he asked.

She bared her teeth at him as she sniffed, thoroughly, and Harry wondered for a moment who led their little impromptu pack, her or Hawthorn. Probably Hawthorn, since she'd been a werewolf longer, but Harry could see Delilah challenging her for the position someday—if werewolves were anything like normal wolves, which Harry had to admit they might not be. "I am," she said. "It is a pleasure to meet you at last, Mr. Potter." She cocked her head to the side and relaxed suddenly, as if his scent or the power of his magic had reassured her somehow.

Harry turned and nodded at the final woman. She had her head down, but she looked up at him with a jerk. Harry winced as he saw the marks of the bite that tore across her face from the right side of her head. Her right ear was missing, and Greyback's fangs had obviously stopped just a few inches short from her eye. She had a cast of features that marked her as related to Tybalt, but the ripping scar and her dark hair separated her entirely. "I am Claudia Griffinsnest," she said. "And you might as well stare. I owe you a debt I can never repay, and I've lost things I can never recover."

"I am sorry," Harry offered quietly. He hesitated, then decided he had to take the risk, and flipped his left sleeve back from the stump of his left wrist.

Claudia relaxed almost at once. "Thank you," she said. "It is good for me to remember that others have made sacrifices, as well, so that I do not sink into despair."

"I'll say," Tybalt murmured. "You ought to hear her moaning on sometimes, Harry. Utterly insufferable, really."

Claudia snapped at Tybalt. Harry couldn't tell how serious it was. The bite, or perhaps just her control over her emotions, made her face very hard to read. Delilah put a hand on Claudia's shoulder, though, and Fergus cast Tybalt a harsh glance, edging towards the two women.

"It is good to see you again, child," Laura Gloryflower said, and the whole focus of the company seemed to shift and reorient on her. Harry braced himself. He wasn't about to yield control to her the way he had when they first met in the Ministry. He kept his face cool as he inclined his head back.

"Thank you, Mrs. Gloryflower," he said. "Is there something specific that you came to see me for?"

"Partly, I came because Delilah is my niece," said Laura briskly. "But I also plan to join in the attack. I should have been there when you went after Voldemort on the equinox. Alas, a few members of my family still did not see sense about allying with you. Now they have." Her tranquil face gave no sign of how fierce the arguments must have been, though Harry couldn't help scanning for it. "I gave them a good scolding," Laura elaborated. "And I've also talked to a few members of Fergus's family. They'll be along as soon as Paton Opalline gets over this little fit of sulks he's having about allying with someone he thinks is a Dark wizard." She nodded to Harry. "I told him that you were a Dark wizard, of course, but also that you were a Light wizard. He had to think about that."

Harry smiled in spite of himself. "Do you think they'll join in the next attack that we plan on making?" he asked.

"I think not," said Laura. "Not unless they somehow manage to get themselves together in the next week, and it always did take Paton longer than that to make up his mind."

Harry blinked, but his mind had already made the connection. "The full moon is in a week," he breathed to Hawthorn.

Hawthorn bared her teeth in a joyous snarl. "Even so," she said. "That's why we came, Harry. We want to fight on your side in

werewolf form. Narcissa pulled the location of Woodhouse from her sister when she tortured her.” Harry noticed that the Light werewolves frowned at the mention of torture, and Laura pursed her lips. Hawthorn ignored that. “I know where Woodhouse is, what it looks like. The Dark Lord used it as a base during the First War. And this should show the Ministry, I hope, that not all werewolves are evil.” Hawthorn snapped her teeth shut on air. “They’re pushing to make the laws against us even stricter, Harry.”

Harry frowned. He wondered if that was why he hadn’t heard anything from Scrimgeour lately. He’d assumed it was due to the Minister not wanting to seem too personally involved in the abuse case in a way that might prejudice the evidence. Well, I will have to write him a letter about that.

“We should summon the others, then,” he told Hawthorn. “It’s Saturday, so I can meet with you all day. I want to create a plan that will maximize everyone’s strengths, or at least maximize the strengths of everyone who’s available to attack that night.”

Hawthorn smiled. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

It was afternoon before everyone who could respond had managed to gather in the Room of Requirement. Somewhat to Harry’s amusement, McGonagall had not only permitted many Dark and Light wizards on Hogwarts grounds, but insisted on attending the meeting herself. Of course, she’d attended the last one, but that was perforce, since it was in her office. Harry wondered if she did actually mean to be a part of the attack.

Probably not. She knows her responsibilities, and it would be disastrous for Hogwarts if she died. She just wants to make sure that we’re not casting damaging spells on school grounds, I think.

The Room had chosen to present them with a large circle of chairs, couches, and divans, rather like the setup when Harry had met with his Dark allies here last Halloween. Harry had appreciated the encouraging message of unity that sent—

A message of unity that lasted only until his Dark allies arrived. They took one look at Laura Gloryflower, Tybalt, John, and the Light werewolves, and sat on the opposite side of the circle. Harry ground his teeth, in particular, at the way Arabella Zabini kept a hand on her wand, eyes shaded and wary, and how Adalrico stared openly at Laura, as if he could not imagine what she was doing here. Laura simply nodded at everyone, inflexibly polite, and went back to talking with her niece. Mortimer sneered when he came in. Burke made a strangled sound. They might not have existed as far as Laura was concerned.

But Harry saw the snarl that wrinkled Claudia's lips, and the way Henrietta's eyes lit up at the sight of her scar, and he could just imagine what was about to happen next.

Then Honoria came in and saved the day.

"Tybalt!" she exclaimed, as if she had been dying for the sight of him, and rushed across the room to throw her arms around him. Tybalt stood up and kissed her on the cheeks with loud smacking sounds. Harry knew that most of the people in the room were staring. He couldn't help it. He was staring himself.

Honoria looked around the room from the shelter of Tybalt's arms, her eyes wide and innocent, illusions of house elves dancing around her. "This is the perfect place to announce our affair," she said. "I'm really a man, you see, and Tybalt's really a woman, and we've been secretly in love since we were nine. Sorry to disappoint you." She nodded at John. "You especially, John, but really, you should have suspected something when Tybalt started wearing skirts."

John reached up and smacked his partner on the arm. "That's why you've refused to come to bed with me since we joined," he said. "Horrendous pimples all over your body, right."

Honoria and Tybalt burst into simultaneous giggles, and released each other. Honoria sat down in the chair next to them, whispering furiously. The silence that remained behind them was gobsmacked, but less tense than it had been. No one was going to do anything for

a while, Harry suspected, on grounds of being thought absolutely ridiculous. What did you follow a performance like that with?

More entrances, it turned out. Ignifer eyed the Light contingent sourly and sat on the far side of the circle from them, but at least Harry could be sure that she wouldn't cause trouble; she seemed more intent, after that initial look, on pretending that they didn't exist. Snape and Regulus at least contented themselves with no more than a few stern looks at Harry, and suspicious gazes for absolutely everyone else in the room. Thomas came in with a book and attempted to engage Harry in a conversation about something called the Grand Unified Theory of Every Kind of Magic, but luckily his wife had come with him, and managed to steer him to a seat without seeming impolite. The Malfoys entered with a nod from Lucius and a kiss on the cheek for Harry from Narcissa. Narcissa took stock of the situation in a glance and sat down beside Laura Gloryflower, pointedly putting out her hand to be shaken.

The real surprises were the last two people to enter. Remus ambled in as though someone had invited him, and immediately sat down beside Claudia. Harry raised an eyebrow, but relaxed when he saw the other werewolves, even Hawthorn, had smiled at the sight and scent of Remus. Remus was, in fact, talking animatedly to Fergus, who began cautiously to answer back.

And then Charles showed up. His gaze snapped around the room at a laugh from Laura, and locked onto her face. A smile Harry had never seen before, deep and wistful, curved his lips.

"Madam," he said. Laura turned her head at the sound. Harry saw her face fire with a look of joy.

"Charles Rosier-Henlin," she said, and rose, and walked across the room to give him a kiss on the cheek, the head of a Light family greeting the head of a Dark family in a way that left no doubt they considered each other friends. She drew back and curtsied to him. "You can still smile like you used to. You have no idea how glad I am to see it."

“Dark Arts don’t corrupt that, Laura, no matter what else they may take away.” Charles clasped her hand and leaned nearer. Harry saw actual adoration softening his face, and knew, as if they had confessed it aloud, that Charles had probably once seriously considered marrying the witch in front of him. “And the Light hasn’t taken away your grace and beauty.”

Laura smiled. “Did you truly think it would?”

“No,” said Charles. “You were too strong for your allegiance to crush you.”

Laura brushed another kiss across his cheek, and then patted his shoulder and walked back towards her own chair. Charles followed her, sitting down in the single empty seat that had been left as a kind of boundary marker between the Light and Dark sections—binding them together in a true circle. Harry smiled at him, and received a slight smile in return.

He stepped into the center of the ring, then, feeling their eyes track and try to swallow him. Draco, sitting on the edge of the circle near Lucius, was looking at him with particular sharpness. Harry reached into himself, drew furiously on that strength that had allowed him to keep going after his mother’s visit at Christmas last year, and didn’t break down in front of their gazes. He looked from face to face, arresting some people in mid-whisper or mid-frown.

“I know what Woodhouse looks like,” he said quietly. “Mrs. Parkinson has put the image into my mind. She said that Voldemort often used it during the first War as a base. It’s entirely likely that he’s using it now as a storage camp for Muggles. If not, then he’ll have it fortified with Death Eaters. I want to take them down on the night of the October full moon.”

“You’re taking werewolves along with us?” Mortimer’s voice soared incredulously. “How do we know that they won’t turn on us and consume us alive?”

“They’ll be taking Wolfsbane, of course,” said Harry. If it wasn’t for the formal promise I’ve made him, I would dismiss him from the alliance

immediately. Narcissa claimed he would bring his family in, but so far none of them have made a move to contact me. I think Mortimer may be so much dead weight. I'll have to study the unbinding rituals to get out of a formal alliance promise. "That allows them to retain their human minds, though not their human forms. We can count on—" He glanced at Remus. "Five werewolves?"

Remus nodded, his eyes glinting. Harry smiled. Remus had changed. Before the Sanctuary, Harry didn't think he would have dared to attack someone in his lupine form. Now, he trusted not only the Wolfsbane, but his own temper in a werewolf body. It was an enormous step forward.

"Five werewolves," Harry repeated firmly. "A witch trained in fire magic." He inclined his head to Ignifer, who nodded back at him. So far, she hadn't said anything about claiming a life debt from him for saving his life during the battle on the equinox. Harry wondered why, but in case she wanted it to remain a private matter, he wouldn't bring it up now. "Four former Death Eaters in human form, one of them a Potions Master. Several skilled Dark witches and wizards. An illusionist, and one still able to pass swiftly from point to point?" He cocked his head at Honoria, who bounced up and down slightly in her seat as she nodded. "Two Light wizards. And, I hope, a lioness." He glanced at Laura Gloryflower.

"I consider most of the world as my children," said Laura. "It is what a puellaris witch must do, to survive a role in public. It will be no trouble to transform once we are within range of the battle, Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded, then turned to Priscilla Burke. "And what about you, madam? Can you allow yourself to join us?"

"Not without Auror Mallory's permission, Mr. Potter," said Priscilla reluctantly. "I will not inform the Ministry of this attack, because they would insist on supervising it, and, I can see, getting in the way by insisting that you not use Dark Arts. On the other hand, I can't fight without betraying the oaths I've made as an Auror."

"This is why you should Declare, my dear," Thomas told her. "Declare for the Dark, and then Auror Mallory would sack you, and then you could fight at our side. See? It's very simple."

Priscilla smiled down at her husband. "Tempting," she said lightly. "But I think not. What I can do, Mr. Potter," she went on, moving her gaze back to Harry, "is inform the Ministry of the attack when it's over. If you have captured Death Eaters who require imprisonment in Tullianum, then we can come in and clean them up."

Harry smiled. "Excellent." He hesitated for a moment, then reminded himself that he need not be afraid to use his magic in front of his allies. This would provide good exercise for it, of the kind that Acies had recommended, and it would probably impress them, anyway. He snapped his fingers, and the sheet of parchment he had prepared rose from the corner, skimmed over Lucius's head, and settled, floating, in front of him.

Harry fixed his eyes on the sheet and narrowed them. Hawthorn had let him use Legilimency on her, and he had a very good image of Woodhouse in his head. The trick was transferring that image to parchment, to make a usable map.

"Pingo Woodhouse," he said, and concentrated intently. The parchment rippled, wavered as if it would tear in half, and then straightened itself out with a jerk. Harry nodded as the image Hawthorn had described to him appeared in outline: a great hollow valley in the mountains of Wales, bordered on three sides by high walls of stone. The fourth side swept down in a gentle curve that provided the main entrance to the valley, and was covered with thick trees. Harry could see why Voldemort valued the place. It was thick with natural magic—it must be, or Muggles would have found and used it—and eminently defensible from the ground. Anti-Apparition wards in all but a few places would restrict entrance nicely by that method. The buildings that filled the valley, all but one made of stone and covered, as Hawthorn had shown him, with thick wards, stood in a quadrangle that would allow those within them to see attack coming from virtually any direction. The central, wooden building, Woodhouse itself, was worked over with dozens of anti-fire spells. There,

Voldemort conducted rituals that the presence of stone walls would have adversely affected.

"I recognize the place," said Henrietta, her voice startled. "How exactly are we going to attack it, Potter?"

Harry smiled grimly. "By a combination of distraction and air," he said. He swung around, meeting each gaze in turn. "I need to know here and now who the best flyers among you are."

"I'm pretty damn good," said John quietly.

Harry nodded to him, and continued turning around the circle. Draco, of course, was leaning forward, staring at him, and Harry rolled his eyes and nodded. Draco sat back, satisfied. Regulus grinned at him. And raising her hand, as if she could not quite believe what she was doing, was Henrietta.

Harry locked eyes with Henrietta. He did not trust her. On the other hand, it would be stupid of her to claim she was good on a broom if she wasn't. "And you really want to join me in the air?" he asked her.

Henrietta let out a sharp breath. "I want this attack to succeed," she said, and then looked surprised that she'd said it. But she went on. "I saw what the Dark Lord—no, Voldemort, was during the attack on the beach. He won't be good for my family or my ambitions if he wins. And I'd rather be a vital part of the attack than just one more Dark witch in the background, Potter."

That, Harry could believe. Besides, he was utterly confident that he was better in the sky than Henrietta was. He nodded, and turned back to the map.

"Mrs. Parkinson has shown me that there aren't spells preventing the approach of brooms," he said. "Brooms are made of wood, and spells aimed at them would disrupt the workings of Woodhouse itself. But there'll be guards watching out for us, that's for certain. We're going to need a distraction, so that we can ride above them without being noticed. That's where the werewolves come in, and our lioness." He nodded to Hawthorn, who bared her teeth in what was not a grin.

“She knows the country around Woodhouse, and can show the others where to Apparate in before the moon rises. Then they’ll transform and strike in through the forest, distracting the guards from me and the rest of us on our brooms. Since Voldemort’s won’t be there, I can concentrate on destroying the anti-Apparition wards. When they’re down, I want the rest of you to Apparate in immediately.”

“I can carry the message!” Honoria proclaimed, all but vibrating.

Harry smiled at her. “Thank you, but I need you on the ground with your illusions. We have a spell that Charles invented which will let me tell you the moment the wards fall; I’ll teach it to you before you leave today.” He glanced at the others. “What do you think so far?”

“I think that not all of us know Woodhouse,” Burke grumbled. “How are we going to find and free the prisoners?”

“This is why we have former Death Eaters with us,” said Harry. “You’ll split into three groups—one guided by Mr. Malfoy, one by Mr. Bulstrode, and one by Professor Snape.” He shot a quick glance at Snape, whose face had turned pale, but who merely nodded when Harry locked eyes with him. He’s being practical, for once, Harry thought. He knows that he’s not good enough on a broom to guard me. “They’ll be able to show you the likely places where prisoners are hidden, and what traps to expect.”

“You don’t think that You-Know-Who will have set new traps for us?” Tybalt asked, his voice worried. Harry saw him glancing at his partner, and guessed that he didn’t like the thought of being separated from John. “After all, why should he leave them the same as they were, since he knows that some of his followers have turned traitor?”

“The unique nature of Woodhouse restricts the defensive spells able to be used there,” said Lucius smoothly. “The Dark Lord will assuredly have changed some of the traps, but I was frequently at Woodhouse in the last years before he fell. There are few of the traps that I will not have seen.” His eyes flashed as he smiled, and Harry saw just how much he was looking forward to striking back at Voldemort. Of course, Voldemort had sent Evan Rosier to kill him,

branded him for life, and done other things to him. "I'll brief you on those this afternoon."

Harry snapped his fingers, remembering something he'd forgotten to ask Hawthorn. "Mrs. Parkinson," he said, recalling her attention from a quiet argument with Delilah. "Can Madam Apollonis use fire at all, or do the spells at Woodhouse prevent any kind of flame from springing up there?"

"No," Hawthorn said. "She would not be able to destroy Woodhouse itself—and I would advise you not to try," she said, with a little bow to Ignifer, "but she can use her flame in other ways."

"Good." Harry turned back to Ignifer. "I'll rely on you to provide us light for the attack, once it gets going and there's no need to hide any more. The moon will be full, yes, but I don't want to take the chance of any of us hitting each other by mistake."

Ignifer looked as though someone had just handed her the best birthday present ever. "That will be no problem."

"How do you know that the Dark Lord won't be there?" Burke asked then. From the tone of his voice, he wanted to make Harry's life difficult, but Harry was grateful for the question, and that it was Burke who had asked it. That man was also irritating, for all that he'd fought when called, and it might impress him to realize exactly what had happened in the battle on the beach.

"I hurt him too badly," said Harry. "I ripped into his magical core, not just the power that he'd managed to acquire from draining other people. He'll be furious, yes, but he won't risk just charging into battle against me—and there's no particular reason for him to be at Woodhouse rather than any other stronghold." He glanced at Lucius, who nodded. Lucius had told him in private that he thought it extremely probable Voldemort had retreated to one of his lairs to lick his wounds, where no Death Eaters, no matter how trusted, were permitted to enter. "It's going to take him at least a month to recover completely. If he's there, he can cause trouble, but it won't be on the scale that it was, and I can use my magic for other things."

“A month?” Henrietta’s voice was lively with curiosity. “How do you know that?”

Harry shrugged. “I do. We both have the ability to drain magic. I felt what I took from him. It’s like estimating the amount of water in a glass. I know how to do it by sight, but I couldn’t tell you in terms of inches from just a glance.”

Henrietta frowned, and then her eyes widened, as though she had just thought of something. But she said nothing, and Harry turned to the other problems that were left—minor problems, since no one else provided a major challenge to his plans. Then it was a matter of making sure that everyone learned the communication spell, memorized the geography of Woodhouse, and did what else they could to insure the attack was a success.

Harry could not believe how much better he felt, now that he was doing something that should result in a substantial loss on Voldemort’s part. He was definitely meant to fight in an offensive war, he thought.

And that was strange, really, considering how long and hard he’d trained in defensive magic to protect Connor.

He shrugged, because thinking about it too much would mean thinking about himself again, which he was tired of doing, and returned to making exact plans for guiding the Muggles out once they’d rescued them.

Henrietta felt as though someone had torn her broom out from under her. She stared at Potter, this time giving special attention to the lightning bolt scar under his fringe. It made sense, really. And this second coincidence was too great. She felt like a fool for not seeing it before.

Both Parselmouths. Both with the ability to drain magic. And yes, that could be a curse scar from surviving Avada Kedavra. It’s not as though enough people have them for it to be a rule that one of them must be heart-shaped.

Potter is Voldemort's magical heir. And almost certainly the one who actually bounced the Killing Curse back at him.

That...put rather a different spin on things.

Henrietta tapped her fingers on her knee, only coming out of her thoughts when she needed to learn a spell, contribute a comment that no one else was thinking of, or answer a question. In the meantime, her thoughts spun and eddied around a different picture of the future than she'd had just an hour before.

There was the slightest, smallest chance that Potter might be like the Lords and Ladies she'd heard of in the ancient days, the ones who had treated their companions as actual companions, not expendable bodyguards or arrow fodder. Voldemort did not treat his Death Eaters that way, Merlin knew, and that was one of the reasons Henrietta had never wanted to join them. She was too smart, too skilled, too valuable, to be a pet.

When she'd heard that Potter refused to declare himself a Lord, and then met him, she had assumed that he was also too emotionally weak to be the kind of wizard who could stand up to his powerful followers as an equal, never mind be an actual leader.

But now, if that was not true—

Henrietta whipped her thoughts back into line. She knew what the world was like. She had lived in it and thrived, survived, flourished, because she adapted herself much more easily to disappointed hopes and dashed expectations than other people did. While her yearmates still gaped and mourned that Slytherins were treated badly by the other Houses, Henrietta had accepted it and was turning it into a weapon. And while she had listened to the tales of true Lords and Ladies with a yearning heart when she was younger, she knew before she was seven that no one in the wizarding world was really like that, not Grindelwald and not Albus Dumbledore and not Voldemort.

It was stupid to think that Potter would be the exception, particularly when he refused the title. And she was an idiot to be thinking that there was even the chance that he would be different.

But, still...

She had time to think, didn't she? No one knew she had Potter's hair. She had set the Polyjuice to brewing, but it would take another three weeks to be ready. And her plan was not the sort that required immediate confrontation.

She had time to test Potter, to ride beside him in this attack, and see if he was a true Lord.

You know he is not.

But she wanted to see.

Henrietta Bulstrode had never blinded herself to reality. And if reality had decided to take a sharp turn for the sublime, then she might as well ride beside Potter with sincerity in her heart, for once, and see what happened.

She made the decision with considerable force, if only to stop the struggle in her mind that wanted her to decide against Potter. That was annoying, she thought. Sometimes lately she felt as if her thoughts were not her own, as if someone were guiding, steering, directing them.

She settled the conflict with a sharp shake of her head—she would follow Potter with a true heart for now—and turned back to the battle plans.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Through the Fire

Harry had a plan for Sunday.

He didn't like all aspects of the plan. In fact, he was so far from liking all aspects of the plan that he had thought about giving a few of them up. Surely it didn't really matter if he delayed some of the confrontations he knew would happen. He still had a few days to speak to his brother, and Snape could wait even longer. They were going to fight a battle together. That was the important thing, wasn't it?

Except that it wasn't the only important thing. Harry opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling of the four-poster, absently stroking Fawkes's feathers. He wouldn't have slept at all last night if not for the phoenix's help. Fawkes chirped twice, once for each caress Harry gave him, before tucking his head further under his wing and lifting one foot to curl against his breast.

Maybe I should be strong enough to force my mind past this, but I'm not. Harry gave an irritated sigh and rose; he didn't think he would get back to sleep right now unless he asked Fawkes for another song, and then he might slumber through breakfast, when he intended to put the first part of the plan into motion. He scooped up Argutus and went to use the showers. The Omen snake lifted his head and flicked his tongue out to catch one of the falling drops of water.

"I thought you only drank cold water," said Harry, though by this point he didn't know why he was surprised. It really hadn't taken Argutus long to recover from the pain curses that Margaret had cast on him, and he had promptly gone back to wandering around and trying new things. If one of those new things was catching warm water on his tongue—well, why not?

"No," Argutus said peaceably, and then wound into Harry's hair, which caused a problem when Harry was trying to use his hand and his magic to clean it. Harry settled the Omen snake on his shoulders again and went back to the shower, his mind circling uneasily around the confrontations he planned to fling himself into.

The first one was probably the least problematic. Harry knew that he would enjoy it.

And that was the problem, really. He didn't want to be someone who would take pleasure in other people's pain. It reminded him too much of both Bellatrix and Voldemort.

But it has to happen, Harry reminded himself, resigned, and then patiently pulled Argutus out of his hair again.

Harry shook his head when Draco tried to pass the Daily Prophet to him so that he could see the new article. He would lose his appetite if he read it, and then he knew what the people who loved him would have to say about that. He picked up a forkful of sausages instead, and began eating, well aware of the eyes on him—from the Ravenclaw table in particular.

She'll approach me soon. I think she would have yesterday, except that I was meeting with my allies all day and she didn't see me. One hundred fifty points from Ravenclaw aren't going to do anything to her obsession.

"I want to try some sausages," Argutus said, coiling down his arm. "They look like crickets."

"I should find someone to heal your eyes," said Harry, even as he put down his fork, broke loose a bit of sausage, and held it out to the Omen snake, who happily stretched his jaws wide and swallowed it. "These do not look like crickets."

"You do not look at things with a snake's eyes." Argutus's tongue flickered, seeming to trail the scent of where the food had been. "It is wrong of you. If you looked at things with a snake's eyes, if you were more like a snake the way you should be, then you would not hurt as much." He craned himself around Harry's neck, leaning forward obnoxiously onto the plate. "More please."

Harry rolled his eyes, and caught a glimpse of Draco watching him with a faint smile. Harry was glad of that. He'd come back to the common room so late on Friday night that they hadn't had much of a

chance to speak about Margaret or what she'd done, and then yesterday, of course, had been filled with meetings and sending messages and strategizing for the attack on Woodhouse. Harry knew that Draco wanted to speak to him in private, and extensively. That was another of the confrontations planned for today, and probably the one Harry was least dreading.

"Here comes the one who hurt me."

Harry stiffened, but kept on eating. He would wait for Margaret, who was approaching him from behind, to tap him on the shoulder.

Then he realized that that wouldn't work, because Millicent and Blaise were casually rising to their feet and turning to face Margaret. They leaned against the table on either side of him and stared at the Ravenclaw. Harry knew hexes would fly in a moment if he didn't do something. He didn't want that to happen. Points would be taken from Slytherin, and Margaret would be hurt beyond what she deserved.

And should I even value my House's points as more important than her health?

Maybe he shouldn't, but he did. This was the kind of irritating truth that had driven him to plan the confrontations in the first place. He should be strong enough to ignore and put up with all the minor annoyances, but he wasn't, so he would handle them.

He turned in place, and raised an eyebrow at Margaret, who looked startled. Harry frowned. She should have known I would notice my Housemates' movements, at least.

Draco, he noticed, kept right on eating. Harry was grateful for that. Draco's rage would be more dangerous than Millicent's or Blaise's.

Margaret did him the favor of getting right to the point. "Sitting at the snakes' table and eating your breakfast like a normal person, Potter?" she asked. "Of course, everyone can hear you hissing all over the Great Hall. There isn't anything normal about that."

"I had a question to ask you," said Harry, making sure that he kept his attention fixed on Margaret's face so that he didn't look at Argutus and accidentally speak Parseltongue.

"Yes, Potter?" Margaret looked absurdly pleased. "Finally realized you can't find your way out of the Dark on your own?"

Of all things, it was that which made Draco's fork scrape across his plate. Harry decided to hurry things up before Draco could work his way into the confrontation.

"Did you hear about the special permission that Professor Merryweather's given me?" Harry looked at her in polite concern. He was aware of eyes fastened on him all over the Hall, especially from the head table. He didn't look away, didn't meet them. He had to carry this through now, or Margaret would be cursed within an inch of her life. "That I can use my magic to defend myself, I mean."

"You didn't do anything permanent to me when I hurt your snake," Margaret answered at once. "Why would you do anything now?"

Acies was right. If I'd hexed her badly enough, she might have backed off. But I can't regret not using magic on Friday. She would have died, as angry as I was.

"Because I've decided that you're an annoying little cockroach," Harry answered, "and the only way to kill a cockroach is to step on it multiple times. *Acclaro incogitantiam!*"

Margaret flinched back as the bright pink cloud of the spell surrounded her, then examined her arms as though she expected to find them changed suddenly into flippers. She leaned forward, peering at Harry. Harry smiled at her and turned around to go back to his breakfast.

"Don't you ignore me, Potter," Margaret whispered viciously. "Do you really think that they'll let you stay much longer in the school, you—"

And then she stopped as the laughter began around her, and she heard her own voice, speaking from the back of her head.

“Oh, Merlin, I think my breasts are about to fall out of my clothes! They aren’t, are they? I don’t dare reach up and adjust them right now. No, they aren’t, it’s just that same feeling I get every day. Phew! That’s good. Now, if Michael will just look over here and notice me threatening Potter, then I could die happy—”

Margaret’s face flushed incredibly red when Harry glanced at her over his shoulder. “What the fuck did you do to me?”

“You ought to be able to figure it out,” said Harry lightly, while Margaret’s voice went on narrating how embarrassed she felt. “That spell reveals your secret thoughts, the ones you don’t want anyone to know. It’ll keep doing that for an hour.” He tried to squash his own enjoyment, he really did, but he snickered in spite of himself when Margaret’s voice started going on about how Michael would never touch her now. “The next time you attack me or anyone else I care about, two hours, and the secrets will be worse. And then three hours, and so on. Soon you might have a voice narrating every aroused or angry or ridiculous or jealous thought you possess to an interested audience at all hours of the day. Unless you stop attacking me and my friends, of course, and keep your wand and your hands and your tongue to yourself.” He couldn’t help adding, “That shouldn’t be hard. I doubt Michael Corner will really want your tongue in his mouth now.”

Margaret fled the Great Hall, laughter following her like a pack of barking hounds. Argutus complained on his shoulder about not being able to understand English. Blaise and Millicent sat down again, putting their wands back in their sleeves.

“I underestimated you, Harry,” Millicent muttered in his ear. “That was a fitting revenge.” Then she broke out snickering again. “Oh, Merlin, her and Michael Corner? What kind of dreamworld is she living in, to consider that a possibility?”

Harry shook his head, and glanced sideways at Draco. “Are you convinced that’s enough of a punishment?” he asked.

“Yes.” Draco shuddered dramatically and picked up his glass of pumpkin juice. “For everyone. I really didn’t want to know about Parsons’s sex life, Harry.”

“And you never have to, as long as she listens to sense,” said Harry. He relaxed, his emotions melting into pleasure—half relief that Draco wouldn’t go after Margaret now, and half enjoyment under Draco’s approval.

“That’s not likely to happen.” Draco sent him a wounded look. “The first time we have to hear her meditate on taking a shit or biting her toenails is when I hex you back.”

Harry laughed in spite of himself, and then Draco leaned nearer him and lowered his voice.

“On the other hand, I might not. After all, I think some of your thoughts that that spell might show should be reserved just for me, don’t you agree?”

Harry could feel himself flush, not only because of the words but because of Millicent’s sideways interested stare. He held Draco’s eyes and nodded. Draco sat back, a half-smile playing on his lips.

If he does want to talk to me after breakfast, perhaps it won’t be so bad, Harry thought hopefully.

Sure enough, Draco matched his stride to Harry’s as they passed out of the Great Hall, and turned him gently but inexorably towards one of the moving staircases, indicating he wanted to go upstairs to talk, instead of the Slytherin common room. Harry supposed it couldn’t hurt. There would be fewer people to overhear them if they chose an abandoned classroom, and they wouldn’t have to kick Blaise out of their bedroom, which always made him sulky.

“Here, I think,” said Draco, opening a door and peering into a space Harry thought had probably been a storage room once. Odds and ends filled it—broken chairs, half-severed desks, dead plants that looked like abandoned Herbology projects, torn blankets. Harry wondered who saved things like this, even as Draco steered him

inside with one hand on his back. Did Filch really think he could repair them without magic, or had it been one of his predecessors?

“I want to know why you wouldn’t let me defend you on Friday.”

Well, that’s direct.

Harry swallowed and turned around, leaning on a wobbly chair. Draco didn’t move away from him, even though a good five feet separated Harry’s chair from a convenient desk where he could have sat and likely had it not collapse beneath him. He stood in front of Harry, and used his height advantage unfairly, staring down at him.

Harry sighed and reached up to stroke Argutus. “Because I thought you would kill Parsons,” he said quietly.

“I wouldn’t have,” said Draco.

“Badly wound her, then.” Harry wanted to turn away and wander among the chairs, to avoid Draco’s eyes, but the chair was just the tail end of a mound of furniture. He had to stay where he was. “You know what the relationship between Slytherin and Ravenclaw is like right now, Draco. Cho and Luna and a few other people are trying, but they’d have to stand by their own House if you managed to hex Parsons hard enough to send her to the hospital wing—“

“Harry.” Draco reached out and gripped his left wrist, his way of insuring Harry paid attention. Argutus, who’d been slithering down Harry’s shoulder to curl around his left arm, protested sleepily. “That’s just an excuse. You know it. If I’d hexed her, you wouldn’t have had to. And I think her own House would have understood, even if it was something nasty and disabling.” He paused, then added, “And I want to know why you ran away, and then didn’t want to talk to me about it when you came back to the common room.”

“I ran because of my own anger,” Harry admitted. “I could have killed her, Draco. I might have.”

“And was there a reason that you put yourself under a spell so that no one else could find you, rather than just getting outside the room so

you could calm down?" Draco sounded like Lucius again, Harry thought, not disdainful, but cool, with determination under his tone like steel under a layer of snow. "I would have followed you out, Harry, instead of trying to hex Parsons, if I had any idea where you were. I cared more about comforting you than taking revenge on her."

Harry winced. "I know."

"Then why?" Draco persisted. "Both for yourself and for her—if you really have to care about what happens to her—it would have been the better course."

Harry braced himself. Draco already knew about his dream. And he trusted Draco. He could do this. He just didn't like admitting these things aloud. They sounded stupid.

"Because I wanted to disappear," he said. "To just stop mattering, for a while. To go away." He shrugged. "You know, like the dream."

"You said you knew the dream couldn't be real," Draco pushed. He turned and leaned back against the mound of furniture, still gripping Harry's wrist. "Why did you try to grab it the moment you felt hurt?"

Harry hesitated.

"The truth, Harry. You owe me that much."

"Because I still want it," Harry said. "I want them to stop looking at me, stop seeing, stop caring. That means everyone." He swallowed back the lump in his throat and met Draco's gaze. "Even you, sometimes."

Draco snorted, his eyes dark and a muscle jumping in his cheek. "That's never going to happen, Harry," he said. "You can make me look past you with a spell, but you can't make me stop caring about you—except with compulsion, which I know you would never use."

"I wonder, sometimes," Harry said. "When I get as angry as I got at Parsons on Friday—"

"You had every right to get that angry at her."

Harry frowned. “Draco, there was a moment when I knew that I could have looked at her and made her cease to exist by willing it. That’s not a comfortable thing to know.”

“Can you teach me that trick?” Draco asked lightly. “I want to use it on Professor Vector sometime.”

“Draco—“

“I know,” Draco said, and his hands rose and skimmed over Harry’s face and hair and scar, in no particular order, touching wherever he could touch. “You worry so much about other people that that would horrify you. But, Harry, the important thing is that you’ve always had enough self-control not to kill just because you’re irritated. You can’t blame yourself for possessing the ability. That’s what Lord-level magic’s like. You might not like it, but it’s there, and you should use it for other things—like that spell today—instead of just trying to disclaim it. Or run away from the people who care about you and hide under a spell, for that matter.”

Harry nodded, reluctantly. What Draco said made a good deal of sense. Of course, he could be free of having that much magic if he sacrificed some of it, as he had planned to do last year when he contemplated freeing the northern goblins, but then he wouldn’t be able to free other magical creatures of their webs.

“Thank you,” he said, and brushed a light kiss along Draco’s cheek. He had to ask. “Do you think I would ever do that, Draco? Lose control like that and obliterate someone?”

Draco leaned back and stared hard at him. “If you do, Harry,” he said, “you’ll have an excellent reason.”

Harry nodded again. He didn’t have that kind of faith in himself, but Draco’s declaration was solid enough to lean on. And perhaps he could grow that kind of faith in himself, even think he had the right to be as angry as he’d been on Friday.

Perhaps.

He was glad that that confrontation had gone so well, because now he had to go talk to Snape.

It's just a door. Harry frowned at the door to Snape's private rooms. It's not intimidating. If you're frightened of a door, how in the world are you ever going to deal with Snape?

He shook his head. He would deal with Snape because he had to, but he couldn't help thinking it would have been easier if the door had stood open, if Snape had seen him already, and he had no choice about coming in.

Easier, but since when have you chosen the easy route?

Harry sighed, and knocked.

There was a long pause from the other side of the door, long enough to make Harry wonder if perhaps Snape was elsewhere. But he'd seen him leave the head table that morning just before he and Draco went for their little talk. Snape didn't usually spend Sundays, even bright and sunny Sundays, wandering the grounds of Hogwarts and singing a merry little song.

"Harry."

Harry jumped and turned around. Snape stood behind him, raising one eyebrow at—what? Once, Harry would have known. Now it might have been the expression on his face, or the state of his clothes, or his stare.

"Professor," said Harry. "Sir." Now he would have to stop babbling titles and actually say what he had come to say. "If you're not busy, may I speak with you?"

"I have just returned from speaking with the Headmistress about Slytherin's position in Hogwarts," said Snape. "My duties as Deputy Headmaster are done for the day, Harry. Please come in." He

reached out and skimmed his hand just above the door, making several complicated wards hiss and spring back, and whispered the password, deliberately loud enough for Harry to hear that it was "Atropa belladonna." Then he passed inward, and Harry had to follow him.

He'd been less often in Snape's private rooms than in his office, and didn't like them as well. There were racks of Potions ingredients in the office, worktables, cauldrons kept specifically for students with detention to scrub, Transfigured chairs, and dozens of other little objects that Harry could put between himself and a gaze or a question that got too probing. Snape's rooms were more open, the first one having only a couch on one side, near the hearth, and a chair on the other. Snape took the chair, forcing Harry to sit on the couch.

I can't hide. Damn it.

Harry sat stiffly, not trying to force himself to relax. It was hard enough to be here at all. He was no Gryffindor, but he knew he had courage. He just had to summon that courage, and stop dithering. It didn't help that Snape remained absolutely still and quiet, apparently not uncomfortable with the silence.

"Sir," he said at last, fixing his eyes on Snape's hands, "I wanted to apologize. And tell you some things that you may not have understood. And ask for a favor." He took a deep breath and forced his gaze to rise to Snape's face.

The expression there was one it took him a long moment to understand. Harry blinked. Relief? He feels relief?

It hadn't really occurred to him that Snape would be hurting over this as much as he was. Harry uttered a small hiss of exasperation, mostly at himself. I don't understand why he loves me as much as he does, but you'd think that I would stop forgetting it.

"You may begin with any of them, Harry," Snape said. "The apology only if you wish to."

Harry nodded. "I do. I want to say I'm sorry for misunderstanding what you said about Connor. I thought you meant that he just didn't matter next to me, that he somehow deserved to die. But that's not what you meant, is it? You like me better, and you think I'm the one Voldemort will target more, so I have to be ready to fight."

More lines of strain eased on Snape's face, ones carved so deeply that Harry hadn't noticed them until they were gone. "Yes," he said. Then, apparently unable to restrain his sarcasm any longer, he added, "I am somewhat surprised that it took you so long to understand, given what I said to you while you brewed the Wolfsbane. You are not in the habit of ignoring your own intelligence, Harry."

"I was stubborn," Harry conceded. Ouch. This hurts. On the other hand, it's only admitting that you're wrong. That means that you can do it. "And I really did think you meant that at first, with what you said in the hospital wing."

Snape hesitated, then spoke as if picking his way among shards of broken glass. "Part of that does not change even with your new understanding, Harry. I still do not think you should have taken that curse. I think you should have trusted to a shield, or simply borne your brother out of the way."

"And had the curse hit someone else?" Harry demanded.

"Did you know for certain that anyone was behind your brother?" Snape shook his head tightly. "No. You made what you thought was the best decision in a limited amount of time. I respect that. But it wasn't the best decision, Harry. You speak of the curse hitting your brother or someone else on the battlefield as though it must never be allowed to happen. Then why does your life matter less than theirs? And why bring them into battle at all? Why plan something like the attack on Woodhouse, where you know their lives will be in danger?"

Harry squirmed. There were a few possible answers to that. None of them were pretty.

"It is a hypocrisy you have ignored for too long," said Snape, his words gentle and savage both at once. "It must be overcome. You

seem to have accepted it, since you have asked for people to fly with you in the next battle. But now, this. And it could happen again. What happens if the next sacrifice saves someone else—Draco, perhaps—and kills you, Harry?”

“Then I’ll have fulfilled my purpose.”

Snape’s face darkened.

“My purpose in making that specific sacrifice, I mean,” Harry hastily clarified. “I didn’t mean that I thought my only purpose in life is to protect other people.”

“And what of those left behind to mourn?” Snape demanded, rising to his feet and pacing back and forth in front of his chair. His robes swirled behind him hard enough to reveal the edge of his Dark Mark. “What of those whose ability to defend themselves you disregard in making this sacrifice? You claim on one hand to trust Draco and the rest of us in battle, but then you would plunge in front of us on the off chance we might be harmed.”

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. This was one of those ugly possibilities that he had thought about. A vates had to respect the choices of others, and avoid impinging on their free will if it was at all possible. By showing that he didn’t trust other people, some of them experienced fighters, to survive on their own, he wasn’t obeying that particular stricture of the path he had to walk.

“Do you understand, now?”

Harry opened his eyes to see Snape kneeling in front of him. His face was a stern mask, but tight with emotions that Harry could not bring himself to disregard. Harry forced himself to nod.

“On one thing, though, I can’t change my mind,” he whispered. “I’m not only making sacrifices because of my training. I’m not.”

Snape stood up and retreated a few steps, until Harry could look at him without craning his neck backwards. “I can provisionally accept that, for now,” said Snape, in a tempered voice. “But so much of your

healing has been internal, Harry. I wish there were a way to judge how far along the road you are. Has ripping apart your mind truly given you good results? Would not talking to someone about your past other than Shiverwood benefit you more than remaining silent?"

"The first I can let you see, at least," said Harry, relief at such a good segue making him giddy. "I wanted to ask for your help in closing my link to Voldemort with Occlumency." He saw Snape relax still further. "A one-way barrier, so that I could remove it if I ever really need to."

To his relief, Snape nodded. "I would not want you to lose control of such a vital part of yourself," he murmured.

"And I wanted to ask for your help in training Connor." Harry ignored the way Snape's eyes narrowed and the cold, sneering mask that hung on his face in Potions class snapped up. "I know you don't like him. But he'll have to go into battle eventually, and I need someone who's really, really good at Dark Arts to train him. Professor Merryweather might, but she might not. Remus would be too kind on Connor, I think, and anyway, he knows more defensive than offensive magic. I'm too much stronger than he is. Please?"

Snape snarled slightly. "Are you thinking of bringing him along in the attack on Woodhouse?"

"No," said Harry quietly. He caught and held Snape's gaze. "And as soon as we're done here, I'm going to go and tell him that."

Snape nodded. "You are not entirely devoid of sense where he is concerned," he murmured. "That is refreshing."

Harry let the sarcasm pass, and waited.

"If I train him," said Snape, "then he must actually train with me, Harry. Not make the half-hearted effort he does in Potions. I know that he is capable of competency, if not actual genius, but he will never try."

"You could try being a little kinder to him," Harry pointed out.

“Why?” Snape folded his arms. “There is no reason holding him back, nothing but dislike of me. I know Mr. Longbottom’s reason for incompetence in the class. Your brother has none of the same reasons. His magic could adapt to the art. He will not make it do so, because he has no patience. Do you really think training with me will inculcate that quality?”

“If both of you try halfway,” said Harry stubbornly. “I’ll tell him that, too. And you won’t have to have an audience in the training like you do in Potions. You can give him all the second chances you like, and still preserve your reputation as the Professor Who Sends Gryffindors Fleeing.”

“If Mr. Potter makes the promise to meet me halfway,” said Snape, “and does not whine about meeting me at eight o’clock twice a week, then I will do it. Until the inevitable moment when all hell breaks loose and he refuses to listen to reason.” He paused, then added, “Eight o’clock on Tuesday and Thursday.”

“Sir,” Harry snapped. Those were the hours the Gryffindor Quidditch team held practice.

Snape stared at him. Harry stared back. Finally, Snape nodded. “Eight o’clock on Wednesday and Friday, then.”

Harry nodded back, and stood. “I’ll tell him. Like I said, I’m going to go explain a few things to him right now.” It was the last of his confrontations for the day. The thought made him dizzy with relief. He’d got through the one with Snape, the hardest one, without breaking down in tears or yelling. That was wonderful, and it gave him some hope that his confrontation with Connor would go the same way.

“Wait a moment, Harry.” Snape put out a restraining hand. “I would still like to see you speak to someone about your past.”

Harry scowled at him. He should have known this was coming, but he’d hoped that Snape would forget it in the irritation of being asked to train Connor. “I speak to Madam Shiverwood, when she summons me,” he said.

"I can understand why you would not want to talk to me, Harry." Snape's face was perfectly still. "But there are other candidates. Regulus. The Headmistress. One of the Malfoys. Even the werewolf, if you must. There is much to be gained from talking to someone who wishes to help you, who is not in charge of many cases of abused children and will lose your face among them."

That's the point, Harry thought fretfully. That's why I like talking to Madam Shiverwood, because she has more children to care about than just me. It was also the reason why talking to Regulus was entirely out of the question. Regulus would concentrate too much on him, and yank and pull and tug out those things that Harry wanted to keep hidden like tangles of hair from his head.

He supposed that of the people Snape mentioned, the best candidate would be Remus, because he had the Gryffindors to counsel, and would be more likely not to force Harry to yield his secrets because of the lack of time.

But he'd already yielded enough in this confrontation with Snape, Harry thought. He'd admitted that he was wrong, and he'd made some steps towards reconciliation, and he'd agreed to block the scar connection even though it could be a useful weapon in the war. He fixed his eyes on Snape's. "No," he said.

"No, what?"

"No, sir."

"That's not what I meant." Snape was fighting hard to keep his voice from a snarl, but Harry heard it anyway. "Why will you not speak with someone, Harry?"

"Because too much of my life is on display already!" The flare of temper arose before Harry could stop it. He controlled it, hard, and turned towards the door. "I understand why you did what you did," he continued, in a low, tight voice. "That doesn't mean I don't hate it, and want everyone to stop peering at me. Most people know what happened, now. I can't do anything about that. But I can and will keep

my feelings on the matter to myself. I have Draco to talk to about other things, like the stupid actions people take as a result of those newspaper stories. I have Connor to talk to if I want to remember something good about the past, and Remus. I have you and my allies to come to about other problems, sir. I don't see what's to be gained by discussing my feelings about—my parents and Dumbledore.” Especially because people keep refusing to believe that I could actually forgive them.

“Harry—“

“No. They're mine, almost the only secrets I have left. They're going to stay that way.” Harry glared at Snape over his shoulder. “I appreciate what you've done in the abstract, sir. But things like this make it really fucking hard to appreciate them in practice.”

He left before the last of the sweet taste of success in his mouth could sour. He managed to calm himself down as he walked. He was sure he was in the right on this one point. He would give way on others. He would try to correct hypocrisies. He would admit that Snape had been right about shutting the scar connection.

But the anger and hatred and forgiveness and love and pity and everything else he felt towards three specific people could not be of interest to anyone else. They were his. The trials would come, and go, and what would happen would happen.

Though not execution. Please, not that.

Harry would go on living through them and after them, unless he died in one of the battles first, and he would go on giving way on other points and correcting hypocrisies and admitting Snape was right. But he could see no reason for him to dig into his soul. Who cared, who had the right to care about those things, except him? It should not even be an interesting subject except to Harry himself.

“But I could—“

“No.”

“You’re not being fair—“

“No, I’m not.”

Connor turned away and punched the wall.

Harry sighed and rubbed his hand over his face. It had been a little much to hope that the confrontation with Connor would go as well as the one with Snape, he supposed. Connor was not Snape. He was impulsive, aggressive, and—well—overconfident. Harry loved his brother dearly, but he knew that Connor was too much a Gryffindor to relish being left out of battle, even though Harry had explained all the reasons as clearly as he knew how. Connor would need more training before he entered battle. He might have been able to go if he would consent to remain behind the lines, since he was brilliant on a broom, but Harry knew Connor, despite giving a promise like that with the best of intentions, would find the thought of interfering irresistible.

How can I blame him for that? I’m the same way. But I’ve had the training.

“I really, really hate this,” Connor told the wall of his bedroom, and then turned around and glared at Harry. Harry was grateful none of his yearmates were there. Of course, the only one who had really seemed tempted to linger and gawk once Harry came up to Gryffindor Tower was Seamus, and Ron and Neville had made a point of dragging him away the moment they saw Harry’s face. “I hate that you’re so much better than me. I hate the fact that you’re going to go out fighting and leave me here, but you’ll take Malfoy along.”

“All three of them, in fact,” Harry agreed lightly. “And it has nothing to do with not wanting to take you along, Connor. I would, if you could keep yourself safe. But you can’t, not yet, and you can’t add enough to the battle to spare the people it would take to guard you.”

He winced as he said that, since it did sound rather heartless. But he’d hardened himself to being heartless when he made this plan. He was not about to lie to Connor about the battle they’d be having on the full moon. He also was not about to take him along.

Connor's face paled a bit, and his eyes sparked. "My compulsion ability—"

"We don't really need anyone compelled," Harry broke in. "We won't want that for the Muggles, if they're there, and we can handle the Death Eaters. Besides, the last I knew, you had to look someone in the eyes to really compel them. It would be hard to do that in the middle of battle."

Connor closed his eyes. "Please, Harry?" he whispered. "I hate asking like this, but I want to fight."

"I know," said Harry, again wanting to squirm in discomfort. But he had made a promise to himself. He intended to carry it through. Last confrontation of the day, he chanted in his head. "But, Connor, I can't. I'm not doing this as your older brother, just making you stay behind because you're younger than I am—"

"By fifteen minutes—"

"See? That would be blatantly ridiculous. I'm doing this as a war leader, and because I know how the people I'm taking to Woodhouse fit into my plans." Connor refused to look at him. It did sound strange, Harry had to admit, and he supposed it sounded stranger to someone who had been used to thinking of himself as the Boy-Who-Lived and the future leader of the Light at one point. "This is a reason to train hard with Snape," he added, trying to sound encouraging. "The sooner you can learn to defend yourself with actual dueling spells, the sooner you can join us."

"I want to go now," Connor whispered. "Someone has to guard your back. And I want to make up for what happened on the beach, Harry."

Should have known that would be in there somewhere. "It was my choice to jump in front of that curse, Connor," Harry said quietly. "Not your fault."

"I was the one who said your name and made it necessary."

“And everything worked out fine,” Harry pointed out. “And now I want you to get the training you need so that that won’t happen again. You can best make up for it by working hard.”

Connor flopped bonelessly back on his bed and lay there for a little while. Then he said, “Eight’o’clock on Wednesday and Friday.”

“Right.”

“There goes my Friday evening,” Connor grouched.

Harry smiled. “Thank you, Connor.” He stepped up to his brother and hugged him. Connor’s arms came up and clenched around his waist with unexpected strength.

“Don’t get yourself killed, you prat,” he whispered into Harry’s ear. “I can’t do this alone.”

Of all the confrontations today, that was what made him blink back tears. Harry whispered, “Thank you,” and then turned and sought the stairs back down to the Gryffindor common room. He could feel his brother’s eyes on his back as he departed.

He felt the urge to turn back and tell Connor he could come, after all.

But he had suspected he would feel that, and his preparation was enough to keep his head high and his shoulders stiff. This was hard, but Harry no longer felt compelled to hold back from doing hard things. If he had the courage and he had the will and he had the necessity, he would go through the fire and come out the other side.

It can’t be worse than what I’ve already survived.

Intermission: Henrietta's Game

Henrietta examined the cauldron of Polyjuice potion, but could detect no differences in it from what should be apparent at this stage, with just a little more than two weeks to go until it would be ready. She shrugged and stepped away from it. Let it bubble and steam for now. She had other things to attend to, including two guests in her house.

She moved from her private potions lab to the ground floor, and opened the second door she came to. The wizard inside was already on his feet, his wand pointed at her. Henrietta lifted an eyebrow.

"I could choose to take offense to that, if I wished," she said, and shut the door behind her.

The man said nothing, though he lowered his wand. Henrietta examined him thoughtfully; this room, a study equipped with shelves but devoid of books, possessed many subtle enchantments to remove glamours and other magical forms of disguise, so she could be sure she was seeing the real man. He had a blunt face and brown eyes that probably looked secretive unless he was smiling. He must smile often, then, in his position. His hair was blond and wispy. He was a Mudblood, and had managed to get as far as he had partially on skill, partially on luck, and partially because his last name sounded like that of a famous Light wizarding family.

None of that, though, mattered to Henrietta as much as the name he had adopted for himself. He had lately started writing Daily Prophet articles under the name Argus Veritaserum. In them were many entertaining untruths about Potter. Henrietta had found them the more entertaining because everyone else thought his identity was a great mystery, but she had found him out in a few weeks by comparison of his writing style to other Prophet reporters'. This only pointed out the stupidity of the rest of the world.

"Sit down, Argus," she said. "Before I tell you what I can procure for you in a few weeks, I have to know how committed you are to lowering Harry Potter's reputation." She moved over and sat down in a chair facing him. Argus followed her slowly down, never looking away from her face. He rarely blinked. Henrietta wondered if the old

stories were true, that Mudbloods sometimes bred with frogs and lizards to increase the strength of their bloodline.

“Very committed,” he said calmly. “Albus Dumbledore is my mentor, the one who taught me about the ethics of sacrifice at a young age, and the reason I survived the first war with You-Know-Who.” Henrietta barely resisted the temptation to roll her eyes. Voldemort had both a name and a title, and either was better than that ridiculous appellation the Muggle-lovers had chosen. “I know that he has made decisions and taken risks that insured the survival of the wizarding world where no one else would have made or taken them. I will not see him accused by a child who ought to be flattered by the degree of personal attention he received from a Lord of Light.”

How delightful. The Mudblood is flushing. Henrietta cocked her head and sat back in her chair. “And you think writing these articles about him will impact on him negatively enough to matter?”

“I am certain of it,” said Argus. “I’m already receiving post telling me that I’ve swayed many readers’ opinions. Now that they think of it, it doesn’t make much sense that fourteen years of child abuse could have gone unnoticed. That means that it was not abuse at all, of course, but something the boy agreed to. Now that he is a teenager and petulant—now that Slytherins have poured their venom into his ears and convinced him he’s special—he’d turn on those who sacrificed so much to make his life worthwhile.”

Careful, Mudblood, Henrietta thought, but did not say. Of course, Argus himself was ultimately a sacrifice in her plans, a role he should have no objections to playing. “Will it be enough to release the Headmaster?”

“One can hope so,” said Argus. “Albus’s trial isn’t until March, and by then, the truth about Potter will have reached everyone. And his parents’ trial isn’t for another month and a half. We may be able to clear Lily and James Potter from charges entirely.” His face shone with hope.

You will not. Potter will destroy you. So nice that he’ll owe your destruction and disposal to me. “Then I can promise that I’ll pass

along the evidence I'll have," said Henrietta, with a firm nod of her head. "Potter doesn't trust me enough yet to include me in all his activities. But I'm working on him. He has some extremely...nasty things planned for two weeks hence, things so nasty they turn even my stomach. He's hinted that he'll include me in those, and I can take photographs of them and bring them back for you."

"Why would you want to hurt him?" demanded Argus, his flush altering from one of hope to suspicion. "He's a Dark wizard, just like you."

Henrietta let her lip curl and her eyes widen. "He is not a Dark wizard. He only plays at being one. And he is the son of a Mudblood. Can you ask why I would want to betray him?"

Argus frowned, then smirked. He must imagine that the similarity of his true last name to the more famous one had guarded his own dirty blood from her. No doubt he was now thinking that she would be chagrined when she found out that she'd helped someone like him.

Betraying him will be nearly as pleasant as getting Potter to submit to me in the first place.

"Then it is a pleasure indeed doing business with you, Mrs. Bulstrode," said Argus, and extended his hand. Henrietta barely let her skin brush his. His blood was less objectionable than his blind fanaticism. Henrietta despised people incapable of looking after their own interests.

She escorted him to the Floo connection by which he'd entered, blocked that particular one so it could not be used again, and then sought another room on the ground floor, three doors down from the study where she had met Argus. Her daughter Edith huddled on the bed, ducking her head and staring fearfully up at her when she came in.

Henrietta smiled and walked forward. Edith cringed, but did not move away as her mother stroked her hair. Henrietta had her well-trained. The new spell curved around her neck and branded into her flesh had something to do with that, of course, but Henrietta prided herself on

the claws she had hooked into Edith's soul even more than the magical compulsions she could put her under.

Edith kept looking down. Henrietta at last murmured, "Good child. Little one. Do you know why I've called you home from Beauxbatons for today?"

A minute shake of the dark head.

"In two weeks," Henrietta said gently, "you will do me a great service. You will drink a potion for me, and then you will do what I tell you to, so that I may take photographs of you doing it. You will ask no questions. You will tell no one of this. If you do, you know what will happen." Her eyes flickered to the spell around Edith's neck. Regrettable, really. Mental control, of the kind Potter's parents used on him, is so much more elegant. At least I know that this will increase her fear of me, and in the future she may do as I say without this outside pressure.

Edith hastily nodded. Henrietta bent down and kissed her daughter's hair. Edith shook under her. Henrietta could feel her magic—the sympathetic twin of her own, which made Edith her heir, but so dimmed by crawling, creeping fear that she would never be a threat to Henrietta's position.

What pleased her even more was the fact that she still had years to work on Edith, who was only thirteen. Even when Henrietta died, her dominion would not end, because her daughter would carry her legacy forward into the future. She would not think a thought whose pattern was not set for her.

"You may leave for Beauxbatons in three hours," Henrietta whispered, and then stood and left the bedroom, her plan buzzing pleasantly in her mind.

Edith would become Potter for as long as necessary to take the photographs, and then Henrietta would send the pictures on to Argus. She would do it only once, though she would retain other photos. When Potter had undergone one round of despair and humiliation, she would offer him the knowledge of Argus's identity, and how to

prevent the appearance of more photos. Probably the gratitude would not be sufficient to compel him to obey her. That was all right. The blackmail material of the other pictures would work well enough.

And if Potter refused even that incentive, Henrietta had Edith. She had seen Potter's sacrificial tendencies on full display in the beach battle. She knew Potter would never let an innocent suffer in his place. He would do what Henrietta wanted to spare her daughter, a child he barely knew.

Henrietta felt regret all the while that she pursued her plan, because fluttering through her mind like bats' wings went the hope that Potter could become like one of those ancient Lords, one she could be actually proud to follow instead of having to assume control herself because it was intolerable to bow to someone less fierce and intelligent than she was.

But what she knew of him, and what she read of him, sifting truth from lies, did not say it so. His lack of response to the Veritaserum articles was the last straw. A true Lord would have demanded an apology, at the very least, and dragged Argus into the light before Henrietta could get at him.

He is well-intentioned, but weak. But he is still a better option than Voldemort the egomaniac or Albus Dumbledore the Muggle-loving fanatic. Once he is tamed to bit and bridle and rein, I think he will do nicely.

Interlude: The Serpent's Breath

October 3rd, 1995

Dear Lord Voldemort:

I hope you do not think I do you any impertinence by contacting you. I have heard, from reading stories of the First War, that one need only speak a certain incantation over a letter in order for it to reach you—but those letters must be sent by those wishing, sincerely, in their hearts to help and not harm you. I have used the incantation, and my intentions are pure. I can only hope this message will reach your hands or the hands of one of your loyal Death Eaters.

I will retain my name in silence for right now, even as I have used charms to disguise my handwriting. I am sure that a wizard of your power is capable of discovering who I am, and even my gender. I would not mind that, but I do not wish just anyone to know. The fools who think me their ally would put up such a fuss. They already do. I am tired of listening to them. I did what I could to maintain the alliance, but they only think me a joker. No one grants me any sincere respect. Even the people I counted on as friends look at me as if they would like to smack me, as if they think that I can't know anything about the real world just because I didn't fight in the First War. None of them did, either, except the traitors who have turned their backs on the allegiance they swore to you. I wonder if they forget that?

My reason for writing is to describe an attack that Harry Potter and his allies will make on the camp of Woodhouse on Saturday, the seventh of October. They will time their attack to coincide with the rising of the full moon, and they have five werewolves with them. The main attack, Harry Potter and four bodyguards, will come in on brooms, so that Potter can drop the anti-Apparition wards while the werewolves distract the guards. They plan to rescue the captured Muggles your Lordship took from London if they can, and if not, to make sure that your Lordship is unable to use Woodhouse in the future. There will be three strike forces working under Lucius Malfoy, Adalrico Bulstrode, and Severus Snape. Aurors will wait until the attack is done to come in and take any captured Death Eaters to

Tullianum. Potter has assumed your Lordship has taken wounds in the autumnal equinox battle so severe that you will not be there.

My Lord, I am willing to serve you. I've had too much contact with Muggles already, which is not surprising, considering my life. I despise them, and I agree that it would be better altogether if they and their tainted progeny were gone from our world. When you discover my true identity, I hope that you will not disdain me for my bloodline. It might seem to compromise my allegiance, but I promise you, I wish you nothing but good. Potter and his allies have insulted me too many times.

If you will it so, I will come to you in the near future and take the Dark Mark. However, I hope to persuade you against this, for now, as it would make it impossible for me to retain my place in Potter's ranks without being discovered. If you allow me to remain where I am, I will be able to pass you information on future attacks, and be well-satisfied in seeing Potter hurt and killed.

They will learn not to laugh at me. I have secrets I have never told any of them, secrets that even well-placed hints only made them sneer at me for. If you are so good as to find me worthy of your service, my Lord, I will be more than happy to reveal them to you.

With sincerity,

The Serpent.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: The Killing Moon

Minerva closed her eyes. She had been looking out across the Great Hall, and found her eyes drawn again and again to the Slytherin table, despite her attempt to look for problems in all the Houses.

This will never do. You know that you cannot favor one set of students, as Headmistress.

She took a deep breath, and sat in silence with her eyes shut for a few moments, hoping it might recall her balance. It didn't, though. Indeed, without looking at anything else, her mind had free rein to show her memories: both of the meeting last week when Harry had planned to attack Woodhouse, and of the battles that she herself had fought in the First War, when the needs of the Light had drawn her out of Hogwarts.

Her fingers twitched. She wanted a wand. She wanted to go to war.

But she had always been sensible. Even then, she had known that Albus called on her only because she was a Transfiguration specialist, and they desperately needed her, since several of the Death Eaters fighting on Voldemort's side were also skilled at transforming humans into animals. She'd even been meant to play a defensive role at first, transforming their fighters back and no more. And then the War had taken a sharp turn for the worse when Voldemort coordinated a series of attacks that left more than a hundred of the Light's best wizards dead, and the Order of the Phoenix became the most important and organized force still fighting.

She'd been on the front lines, then. It was the proper place for a Gryffindor, she thought. We weren't meant to cower behind the lines, to carry out sneak attacks, to hide our strength.

But Albus had been with them then, strong in heart and uncorrupted in principle. Minerva had been able to rely on him to defeat Voldemort when the Dark Lord took the field himself, and she'd known her place: a follower, at best a second-in-command once the War ended and she was Deputy Headmistress, not a leader.

The Headmistress of Hogwarts has to stay behind. And, of all things, the force attacking Voldemort this time is mixed Light and Dark, and has a Slytherin leading them.

At that point, Minerva couldn't help herself; she opened her eyes and looked over at the Slytherin table again. Harry was speaking with young Malfoy, his eyes wide and his movements sharp. He looked as if he would leap to his feet and prowl back and forth behind the table at any moment. Minerva smiled slightly. She knew the signs. Should Harry ever master the Animagus transformation, his form would be feline. His quick reactions, the way he moved, his surges of adrenaline, all confirmed it.

Things are different now, she thought, and the realization settled into the pit of her stomach as it never had before. I am a leader, of a sort, and I must stay here so that the wards cannot fall again. Harry has reached out to people on both sides of the fight. And just as Gryffindor soared into prominence when Albus defeated Grindelwald and during the First War, now Slytherin is rising.

She looked up the table at her Deputy Headmaster. When Severus realizes that, it should make him happy, at least. He's waited a long time to see his House overcome Voldemort's taint.

Severus did not look happy; he had barely touched his food. Minerva slid a plate of the scones she knew he favored towards him. He turned his head and fixed her with a sharp, flat stare.

"Always the mother lioness with her cubs, Minerva?" he snapped.

"If Slytherins starve themselves, who fights tonight?" Minerva murmured back.

Severus blinked, and then examined her more closely, as if he had not known that she recognized the terms on which the battle was being fought. Then he nodded, murmured, "I would be foolish to become like Harry," and began to eat.

Minerva sat back, satisfied that she had done almost all she could. Her fingers still itched, but she would content herself with strengthening the wards tonight.

And doing what she could to keep an eye on the behavior of her students, as well. The antagonism towards Harry was becoming more deliberate, and more worrying. Minerva would almost have said it was the result of a spell, save that she was sure a spell in Hogwarts would target her as well, and she had felt nothing of the effects. Perhaps Godric would know something of it.

Harry tossed back his head and took a deep breath of the night air. It made his breath steam in front of him, and he was grateful for the gloves and Quidditch gear he wore. If it was cool down here, he could only imagine how cold it would be when he was on his Firebolt.

He turned to Draco. "Ready?" he murmured.

Draco nodded. His face was pale, but it was always pale anyway. Harry knew he would certainly be composed enough to fly. He looked around one more time, then strode forward as if he were the one leading the way. Harry snorted and caught up with him inside a few steps.

His own mood was the opposite of Draco's. His nervousness had faded as the week wore on—helped by the fact that he was no longer at odds with anyone, except Snape, who continued to bother him about talking—and a mixture of excitement and wild joy had taken its place. He could feel his heart beating everywhere in his body, in his throat and his ears and his fingertips as well as his chest. He saw everything when he turned his head, minute details he would never have noticed ordinarily, so that he kept starting at the glimpses of things caught from the corner of his eye. He had an answer for every question someone asked him, so much so that he'd quite astonished both Professor Flitwick and Professor Sinistra.

This was his war, the war he'd trained so long and hard to fight. This was the first major battle of it. Harry felt his blood and his mind and his instincts turning towards it like a flower towards the sun.

He spun around and uttered a loud whoop as they walked towards the middle of the Quidditch Pitch, where they were to meet John, Regulus, and Henrietta. Draco gave him a hard look. "Do I want to know what you're so happy about?"

"Probably not." Harry dropped his arms, shifting his hold on the Firebolt so that his fingers weren't quite so cramped, and grinned at him. "You'd probably start scolding me about recklessness again."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "Merlin help you, Harry, if you take one unnecessary risk on that battlefield tonight—"

Harry just hummed and didn't listen to him. He knew the lecture by heart, anyway. He'd got it with every meal and every bedtime since Wednesday.

Draco didn't quite understand, he thought, that battles were chaos once past the initial engagement. Harry sincerely hoped their plans would result in everyone getting alive out of Woodhouse tonight, but he accepted that those plans themselves would shatter when chance and the cruel creativity of Dark wizards went to work. That was why he had at least one weapon in reserve he hadn't told anyone about, two if one counted what Regulus was bringing along. He patted his robe pocket, hearing the crimp and crackle of parchment.

"Harry? Are you listening to me?"

With a start, Harry focused back on what Draco was saying. "Um. No?"

Draco stopped, put out a hand, and snagged his arm, dragging him close. "Pay attention," he snapped. "Keep your mind on what you're supposed to be doing, not on taking curses for people. Fight like a Lord, or a vates, or a hellishly powerful wizard—whatever you want to call yourself, I suppose. Remember that we're there to protect you, and trust us."

"I do," said Harry. "At least, I trust you. I trust you more than Connor, Draco."

That caused Draco to blink and stare at him, but a shout from the Pitch, hailing them, prevented him from saying whatever he wanted to say. Harry broke into a trot, and saw Regulus come striding to meet them. He was wrapped in close dark robes that Harry hoped would keep him warm enough. He had refused to even consider the idea of Quidditch gear, which he insisted he wasn't comfortable in.

Harry scanned him for a moment, looking for the secret advantage that Regulus had said he was bringing along. Yes, there it was, a large sack tied to his belt. The sack quivered now and then. Harry grinned and accepted the half-embrace that Regulus gave him with his left arm. His right hand held his broomstick, a Nimbus.

"Ready?" he whispered into Harry's ear.

"Hell yes." Harry pulled away from him and turned to regard the other two who would be flying with them tonight. John was standing a pointed distance from Henrietta, his head slightly turned away, as though she smelled bad. Henrietta grinned at Harry. She wore Quidditch gear, and shrugged when she saw Harry looking at her.

"I was a Beater for Slytherin," she said simply.

Harry carried on looking at her a moment longer, seeing something familiar in her face. He finally managed to identify it as the same feral excitement that he felt. "You like fighting, Mrs. Bulstrode?" he asked softly.

"Yes," Henrietta hissed. "I would have gone out for a war witch if I didn't have ambitions of actually surviving past my thirties."

Harry grinned, feeling close to the Dark witch for the first time. He nodded to John, and then said, "Stay close to me. We'll be flying beyond the wards of Hogwarts, then Apparating to that glen that Mrs. Parkinson had us memorize. You remember the looks of it?" Everyone except Draco, who would be Side-Along Apparating with Harry, nodded. "From there, it's a straight flight to Woodhouse. We should be able to feel it the moment we Apparate in, thanks to its magic, and we should arrive at nightfall. Then I'll concentrate on dropping the anti-Apparition wards, and we'll get to the ground as

quickly as possible.” He knew they knew this, but it never hurt to review; Harry thought this plan had more chance of surviving than some aspects of the ground strike did. “Are there any questions?”

Four heads shook. Harry felt like howling as he swung a leg over his Firebolt. He wondered how Hawthorn and the other werewolves, who would actually transform when the moon arose, handled the intense excitement.

“Let’s go,” he said softly, and they rose from the Pitch.

It had been a long time since Hawthorn had stood on this particular hillside outside Woodhouse, but she remembered it still, and the others, she saw with no little relief, had memorized the image well enough. They Apparated in not long before moonrise. Hawthorn had already taken the Wolfsbane, but she could feel her wolf stirring in her, speaking words of blood and hatred. This close to the transformation, her skin itched horribly.

Hawthorn turned to glance at the others, resisting the urge to scratch. Laura Gloryflower was the calmest of all of them, her hands linked together and her gaze fixed on the sweep of scree that would lead them downwards and to the west, towards the forest entrance of Woodhouse. Fergus whispered incessantly to Delilah. Claudia stood a short distance from them, trying to make it seem as if she weren’t listening in.

And Remus Lupin...

Hawthorn eyed him cautiously. She did not know what to make of him. He had suffered Greyback’s bite, as they all had, but he’d been a child then, and a werewolf all his life afterwards. Hawthorn had felt like an old soul when she met the three young Light werewolves, since she’d endured multiple transformations while they had yet to go through their first full moon. But Lupin moved with the wolf buzzing under his skin and in his soul, so that Hawthorn half-expected to see his face lengthen into a muzzle even before the moonlight touched him. She kept smelling him at odd times, too, as though his scent were stronger than the rest of them. Cool earth and water, leaves and

raw fur—the closest to a natural wolf's scent that she'd caught since she became a werewolf.

"Stay close together once we go in," she whispered, calling the attention of others to herself. "We shouldn't face any opposition, but if we do, bunch and drive forward. The others are depending on us to distract the Death Eaters. We can't get caught up in a petty battle and slowed."

Claudia gave a little half-yelp in answer; the others nodded. And then Hawthorn stiffened and pivoted, her head turning to the east.

The full moon was rising.

Hawthorn closed her eyes and dropped to all fours as the transformation took her. The wolf stirred madly in her belly, and then rushed out and over her in a drowning tide. Hawthorn could just remember that during her first change, when she didn't have the Wolfsbane, savagery and the desire for blood had come with that first wave, burying her humanity entirely.

Now, though, the wave quieted the wolf's snarling voice, and only resulted in a deep and profound stillness shattered a moment later by the arrival of the second wave. Hawthorn's body rippled and cramped, and then became the center of a star of pain.

Her scream became a howl, mingling with the cries of the others. Hawthorn had only run with Fergus, Claudia, and Delilah once before, on the last full moon, but she had found she took comfort in hearing the voices of a pack.

The agony surged, darkening her vision. Her bones floated like sticks of wood on the sea, altering their shape and composition. But the moment passed, as it always did, and her memory relaxed; she simply couldn't remember what that much pain actually felt like, and the relief was always so blessed.

A third wave, and the color slid out of the world. Scent rushed in to take its place. Hawthorn filled her nostrils with the grass, her

companions, and a certain cool something that only seemed to exist in the world during the first moments of a full moon night.

A musky reek assaulted her from the side. Hawthorn turned her head, snarling, and then shut her jaws as she met the gaze of a great cat. The lioness who had taken Laura Gloryflower's place paced forward a step or two, her tail swishing, and then turned and leaped downhill, towards the forest.

Hawthorn gave tongue to the others, briefly—it wouldn't do for the Death Eaters to be alerted ahead of time by hearing a werewolf's howl, hard as it was to control her voice—and had the satisfaction of hearing them follow her as she trailed the lioness. They bounded steadily south for a short time, then turned west. Now trees were looming ahead of them, and Hawthorn wagged her tail by instinct. She loved being among trees when she was in this form. It was right to feel branches brushing by over her head and briars almost snagging on her coat.

Something shoved up to her right shoulder. Hawthorn started and almost showed her fangs before she realized it was Lupin. He made a handsome, heavy gray werewolf, his ears pricked forward and his steps confident. He caught her eye briefly, and Hawthorn found herself looking away.

That gave her the chance to check on the others, so she didn't mind. Fergus, his coat as pale as his hair, trailed Delilah, who had become a werewolf whose fur showed as a dirty white to Hawthorn's altered eyes. She knew that, in reality, the war witch's coat was golden. That wasn't supposed to happen. Delilah's magic did not seem to care.

Claudia, a heavy black bitch, her scar even more noticeable in this form since it meant one pointed ear was gone, loped at Hawthorn's heels. Her teeth were wrinkled in a silent snarl, not aimed at any of her companions. She always looked like that, Hawthorn knew. Becoming a werewolf had altered her immensely. Once talkative and proud of her beauty, she was now silent and vengeful.

Hawthorn turned forward again as they entered the forest. The wind was against them now, carrying their scents forward, but the feel of

Woodhouse's magic provided a sure guide. Hawthorn kept her ears cocked and turning, seeking out the sounds of traps, but she did not greatly fear anything they might encounter here. Werewolves were immune to so many spells that a trap would have to contain silver or a Killing Curse to be of much use.

A slight snarl was all the warning they had before twelve sleek shapes broke the darkness ahead of them, springing from ambush and hurtling to encompass them. Werewolves, Hawthorn knew at once; they were so close that she could smell them now, though she hadn't before, with the turned wind.

Snarling in rage, she met the charge of the two trying to bowl her over, dodged in a flurry of fur, and snapped her jaws down twice. That left one dragging his intestines and the other hamstrung. The hamstrung bitch tried to whirl and tear her apart anyway. They didn't have the benefit of Wolfsbane, and they were gone into the wildness that would naturally encompass a werewolf when the moon rose.

Hawthorn grabbed the bitch's throat. Slick fur, salty flesh, and then blood as she wrenched her head sideways and tore out her throat. That made the bitch sag. Her companion had tangled his forepaws in his guts and lay dying on the ground. Hawthorn turned to check on her pack.

Three of the werewolves had hit Fergus. Hawthorn saw him die, as two of the attackers held him down at the shoulders and the other sliced through half his neck with cruel fangs. Hawthorn wondered if it was clever or abominable of her that her first thought was, That will bind the Opallines to us for certain. Paton will never forgive the Dark Lord the murder of his son.

Delilah and Lupin were working in tandem to dance around three other members of the enemy pack, making them spin in several directions without landing a bite. Hawthorn felt her lips lift in a snarl of contempt as she saw the clumsy, hesitant movements of the strangers. They were almost certainly new werewolves, this only either their first or second transformation. Delilah had experience gained through six full moons now, and Lupin was a creature of grace and beauty, avoiding their awkward lunges as if he were made of mist.

Claudia had already downed her own two attackers. Their bodies were half torn apart, and she was closing in on another victim, her muzzle stretched out before her body and her paws flying. She was only really happy when she was killing something, Hawthorn knew, potion or no potion.

Laura Gloryflower had just cracked the skull of the last werewolf in her jaws like an egg. She left him slumped, a bloodied ruin, and turned to face the three who had taken Fergus. They closed in cautiously, panting. They were more experienced, Hawthorn saw, more often changed, and what they lacked in rationality they made up in instinct. They knew that this great cat would be a tougher opponent than the young werewolf they'd just slaughtered.

Hawthorn allowed herself a momentary howl of grief for Fergus, packmate, downed, dead, and then she sprang to join Laura. One thought did burn in her head in the moment before she let human experience and lupine reflexes take over to guide her in the battle.

Where is Fenrir?

Harry narrowed his eyes as he saw Woodhouse for the first time. He had known what to expect from the memory Hawthorn showed him, but she had not been able to see all the nuances of the intense natural magic that surrounded it. Harry saw it as a fallen star, a singing star, with subtle, different vibrations arising depending on whether they came from wood, stone, grass, or treetops.

"Enemies."

Harry wheeled sharply. He was flying in the center of their formation, Regulus ahead of him, John and Draco to the sides, Henrietta behind. It was Henrietta who'd spoken the warning, her eyes aimed over Harry's shoulder. He looked, and saw seven brooms rising to meet them from the eastern slope of Woodhouse, behind the quadrangle of buildings. Harry clasped his hand down on the Firebolt until he felt his knuckles pop, as paranoid suspicion, focused on what could happen, became grim certainty.

We've been betrayed.

"We have to kill them or down them," he snapped. "Henrietta, I want you to—"

"Shove it, Potter," Henrietta said. Her wand was in her hand, and she was glaring at him. "Don't be an idiot. Concentrate on dropping the anti-Apparition wards. It's what you're here for. The rest of us will take care of this."

"I have to—"

"Remember your place, you idiot. Avada Kedavra!"

The green fire of the Killing Curse cut the night, and one of the flyers tumbled from his broom. The others broke, dipping and diving, and resumed their flight more cautiously. Harry thought they probably hadn't anticipated an Unforgivable cutting one of them down from so far away. One of them did cast a curse back, but it sputtered and died in the air long before reaching them.

Harry took several deep breaths, and then nodded, and turned towards Woodhouse again, this time seeking to separate the delicate lines of the wards from the rest of the singing, glowing magic.

Draco hovered next to him, Regulus on the other side. John was racing to join the fight with the enemies, and Henrietta was right beside him. All of these things Harry was aware of distantly, but for the moment, as Henrietta had reminded him, he had to do that which he was there for.

His will bore down, his sight reaching out through his eyes, his knowledge joining with them. He knew what wards felt like through his training, and now he sought and found layered defensive spells. He smiled a bit. Voldemort had had what he probably thought was a clever idea, tying the anti-Apparition wards to the magic of Woodhouse itself. Someone would have to destroy the heavily warded wooden building before they could Apparate in.

Of course, Voldemort hadn't been planning on a Lord-level opponent. Harry destroyed the wards from the other end, where they were hooked to the grass and hills of the valley, unbraiding the spells one by one with chanted Finite after Finite. That left a lashing, uncoiling vortex of threads that would have consumed most wizards, but Harry calmly turned them back with his own powerful Protego. The ends of the torn wards retracted into Woodhouse with a snap, like the heads of snails going home. Harry nodded, and touched his left wrist with his hand, using his knees alone to grip his broom as he hovered.

"Adoro braccio de Lucius Malfoy!" he murmured, and heard Lucius's voice speaking his name a moment later. He kept his message brief. His instincts were screaming at him to get to the ground. If Voldemort was there, as now seemed likely, only Harry could face him.

"The wards are down. Pass the message to the others, and Apparate in." The ground forces were grouped together, so Lucius shouldn't need much more than a shout to pass the message.

He ended the spell and then dived, hearing the sharp cracks of Apparition already beginning. Harry kept his concentration ranging ahead of him, trying to find Voldemort. He knew they had been betrayed, but he couldn't bother to waste time on panic and hatred right now. He fed the emotions to the Occlumency pools, and they swallowed them. His focus had to be on finding the Dark Lord.

Draco and Regulus dropped back, flying near his shoulders as they came in across the quadrangle of buildings. Harry kicked his Firebolt further downward, carefully measuring his speed. He didn't want to outpace the other two, but he badly wanted to be out of the air, now that he knew the Death Eaters had forewarning of their arrival. People on brooms were too vulnerable to curses flung from the buildings around Woodhouse.

They lowered—twenty feet above the ground, fifteen. Harry saw two dark shapes fall past him, and heard a triumphant cry in Henrietta's voice. She and John had taken care of the flyers, then, Harry thought, and would soon join them.

Ten feet above the ground. They were next to the northernmost stone building now, flying over a long patch of tall grass.

Blackness surged in the grass. Harry, flown past and turning towards the sudden glimpse of movement, didn't understand what he was seeing until a strip of silver in the black oriented him. By that time, Fenrir Greyback had already leaped, clenched his jaws around the tail end of Draco's broom, and dragged him to earth, shaking and spinning him violently as they went. Draco's scream was caught off as he plowed into the ground.

Greyback tumbled a short distance away, and then rushed back in. Draco had his wand already in hand and managed to get off a spell, but it bounced from the huge black werewolf, as Harry had known it would. Greyback came in close, his jaws snapping, trying to get a firm hold on Draco's torso or limbs.

Harry felt rage turn him incandescent, transparent. His magic branded the night with fire in his immediate vicinity, and then he cried out, in a voice he hadn't known he was capable of, the voice of an angel or a demon, "Greyback. Look at me."

The werewolf shouldn't have known what he was saying, with his mind drowned in bloodlust. But perhaps he could recognize his own name, or perhaps the movement, as Harry came diving straight at him, made him lift his head and turn. Harry saw the moonlight flash on his teeth, on his eyes.

Magic and rage and will together took flight from Harry, slamming into Greyback. For a moment, he was there, Draco temporarily forgotten, his body sinking into a crouch as he prepared to spring at Harry.

Then he—wasn't there anymore.

Harry heard the snap of inrushing air as it came back together around the sudden jagged hole. Backlash made him stagger on his broom, and he wheeled the Firebolt, instinctively compensating for the lack of balance, as he would have compensated for catching a Bludger to the side. Fire ran through his head in small tendrils, making him feel the tiniest bit drunk.

But the intoxication cleared in seconds. He knew what he had done. He had looked at Greyback, and the werewolf had ceased to exist. He had killed him with almost pure magic.

And he could not regret it.

Harry leaped from the Firebolt while it was still a few feet above ground, rolling as his mother had taught him, coming up safe from the fall and collapsing into a kneel beside Draco. "Draco," he breathed, staring at him, looking for some sign of a bite or a scratch. Even such a tiny mark could be sufficient to spread the disease, the werewolf web. He couldn't see one, but perhaps that was just his hope. "Are you all right?"

Draco rolled on his back and smiled up at him. Harry smiled back, unsure if it was the relief or the release of Ignifer's fire that was making his vision burn with white spots at the corners.

Draco wanted to pant, wanted to lie still, wanted to wrap his arms around Harry and hold on, wanted to climb back on his broom and fly out of there. All his desires had narrowed to one when Greyback grounded him—the desire to live—and now that he was past that point and certain he had not died yet, they exploded in a giddy stream, spinning around and through his head.

He'd been thrown down brutally and the breath taken out of his lungs, though, so he just lay there for a moment, staring at Harry, blinking as the streamers of fire abruptly turned the night to high noon, grateful he could see.

He had to see, because the white-cheeked werewolf made no noise as she rose from the tall grass behind Harry and closed on him in a flying leap. For a moment, Draco saw her soaring, her dark fur whipping around her, her teeth bared in a skull-rictus of pain, her face seeming scorched, and entirely bared, by the white left half.

His wand was in his hand, and Draco lifted it, the lessons of a dusty classroom abruptly taking the place of his whirling wishes, and cried, "Ardesco!"

The werewolf's fur caught and smoked, just a bit. She snarled. But werewolves were mostly immune to magic, and the spell was not enough to make her alter the trajectory of her spring. She crashed onto Harry and bore him to the ground, then reared up, gaze locking on the bare back of his neck.

Draco pushed his mind frantically out from his body, and landed in hers. Unfamiliar weight nearly crushed him, the configuration of four legs instead of two drove him mad, and blood-blind savagery and grief for the loss of a mate tried to eat him alive. None of it worked. Draco had his own mate to defend, as this mind understood it, and he possessed the werewolf and pushed her off Harry before he even thought of what he was doing.

He knew his own body would have dropped and collapsed, and he whipped himself back to it, traveling in the snap which he imagined Apparition was like. He opened his own eyes, found his own wand in his own hand, and lifted it. The werewolf lay stunned on her side a few feet from Harry, beginning to lift her head. The hatred that drove her was too great to be deterred by a mere temporary loss of control.

Well, the hatred that drives me is great, too. Draco grabbed that hatred, and the memory of a voice from last year, that of the man who had called himself Moody, murmuring the list of curses that not even a werewolf was immune to.

Draco aimed. It seemed he had all the time in the world. Harry was stirring. The werewolf had stood. She hurtled towards him, paws still silent, teeth still bared in their skull-grin, eyes locked on his throat.

And through all of that, through pain and shock and onrushing death, Draco still had time to whisper, "Avada Kedavra."

His wand shook in his hand as the spell surged out of him, draining him of his hatred, a line of green fire that speared the werewolf and turned all her movement into stillness. She fell where she'd stepped, one paw still outstretched in front of her. Her malice sparked from her dead eyes like his own loathing reflected.

Draco dropped to his knees, panting. He shut his eyes. He hurt, with an emptiness deeper than the hatred had been. He could not believe he had done that, but he had to, because the evidence lay not five feet away.

“Draco.”

Draco turned and buried his face in Harry’s shoulder. Harry was up on his knees now, his arm wrapped around him, murmuring sweet and soothing nonsense into his ear. Draco clung to that. If he hadn’t cast the Killing Curse, Harry would be dead. His first casting of an Unforgivable was more than a fair trade for that.

He’d always known that he would have to do this, he thought numbly, accepted since he was six that he would someday use the green fire. The Malfoys were Dark wizards. Dark wizards used the Unforgivables. Why was it hitting him so hard now? And how could he do nothing for the moment but kneel here and fight tears and bile and vomit?

“It’s all right,” Harry whispered to him, when Draco could concentrate on his words. “It’s all right. She’s dead, Draco, and you’re alive, and you haven’t changed. I promise you.”

Draco had not known how badly he needed to hear that until Harry said it. He wrapped the words around him in place of the arm Harry had to take back, and nodded when Harry stood and looked inquiringly down at him.

Harry nodded back, then gripped his arm and pulled. Draco stumbled to his feet, shocked both by the force of the tug and the kiss with which Harry greeted him when he was standing, hard enough to make their teeth clack together. Harry drew back and grinned at him through a bloodied mouth. Draco couldn’t tell if he’d done that, or the werewolf had, when she drove him into the ground.

“We’ll fight now,” said Harry simply. “Back to back.”

Draco nodded, and the sickness and the emptiness began to thaw. He was here. He was now, and he was alive, and Harry was here and now and alive with him.

Harry turned, his hand still firm on Draco's, and looked across an expanse of grass towards Regulus. Draco saw that his cousin had spilt open the sack he'd brought along, and was pouring a steady stream of small objects onto the ground. Draco shuddered when he recognized them.

"Attention," said Regulus crisply, and the artificial spiders who'd tried to poison Harry in third year spun around and looked up at him. Regulus nodded back at them. "Go in front of us. Bite anyone who tries to cast curses at us."

The spiders gave a massive click of their legs, and then scuttled off, spreading out in a black carpet. Harry gave a howling laugh, and began to stalk after them, murmuring something under his breath. Draco strained to hear as he jogged along at Harry's right shoulder.

"They anticipated our attack, but Voldemort isn't here. He's still too badly wounded, I think. This will be fun."

Draco shuddered a little, but Harry smiled at him over his shoulder, and he forgot his fear at the unearthly beauty of his boyfriend's eyes lit by fire and feral intensity. He shifted his grip on his wand, and turned to meet the rest of the battle, bracing himself to kill again.

He'd done it once. He could do it again.
She'd forgotten.

Henrietta had once loved to fly on a broom. She'd gone out for a Beater less for love of the game than for love of flying. She'd expected the ride to be her favorite part of the evening, and when she'd taken down the Death Eaters who opposed them on brooms—pitiful flyers, one and all—she'd resigned herself to boredom. Even with the help of the traitor that it seemed lurked among their own ranks, the Death Eaters hadn't mustered a competent defense. Then again, why they should have grown in skill since the battle on the equinox, Henrietta didn't know.

But then she landed, and she saw Potter and Malfoy's son dispatching the werewolves, and she paused a moment to admire that, and so she saw the dark figure making his way towards Potter from the shelter of the northernmost building. Henrietta stared. Her heart picked up so much speed that her vision blurred. She could not believe—no. She had forgotten much, including her own excitement at the thought of having a real challenge, but she could not have forgotten the way this man moved.

Apollonis had filled the air with fire, revealing the Death Eater's face, since he wore no mask, but Henrietta didn't need the help. Blind, she would have known who he was.

She had simply never expected to see him again.

As he took aim at Potter, Henrietta, with joy in her heart and wetness forming between her legs, called out, "Cor cordium flammae!"

He staggered, but he was good at resisting curses that took place inside personal shields, and he ended the spell before it took hold. Then he spun, and then he saw her, and then he went quite still.

Henrietta stalked forward, laughing so hard it was difficult to speak. She managed it at last, though. "Hello, Rosier."

Evan Rosier stared at her. There was insanity in his eyes, but no joy. Henrietta didn't think there would have been. Potter was probably a toy to him—so powerful that Rosier entertained no serious hopes of being able to conquer him, only string him along and use him for amusement. Henrietta, on the other hand, had both battled him and fucked him, and walked away alive from both of those encounters. She didn't think there was anyone else who could say the same.

"No words for your old friend? I'm hurt," Henrietta whispered.

Rosier recovered then, and said, with the calm deadliness that he showed when he wasn't playing, "Dolor immoderatus."

Henrietta laughed. He had forgotten some things, including the pendant she carried against her skin, one of the Bulstrode heirlooms,

that prevented the curses Rosier favored from getting under one's shields and inside the body. Not his Blood-Burning Curse, not Ardesco, not the Endless Pain Curse he'd just tried to use, would impact her as long as she wore it.

"I wish you were dead," Rosier said.

"Annoying, aren't I?" Henrietta asked cheerfully, and then they began to dance, and rapture flooded and consumed her.

Lucius came in hard and fast from the south, hearing the cries of werewolves in the woods, seeing Apollonis's fire slice the night into ribbons, feeling his every sense rouse to full alertness.

Behind him were Belville, Burke, Starrise, and Narcissa, all of them as alert as he was, Lucius hoped. He would hate to have something happen to them because they weren't alert. On the other hand, it would be no one's fault but their own. He was their guide, nor their minder.

He saw Death Eaters coming to meet them, clad in dark cloaks and white masks. Memories ran side by side with Lucius for a moment, reminding him of the time when he would have stood among them, and then they died and none took their places. Memories were not the friends of a seasoned fighter in his battle. He concentrated on what was around him. He saw what was there.

And Narcissa was there, on the left, and there were three Death Eaters coming for them, spread out with roughly equal distances between them. Lucius turned, and met his wife's eyes; she was already looking at him.

"Locusta's Kiss?" he asked.

"But of course," Narcissa murmured, and caught his arm. Lucius lifted his wand to point at the Death Eater on the far left. The others immediately scrambled faster, as if they thought he hadn't noticed them.

Lucius cast a moment before he heard Narcissa's voice, intoning the same curse. "Virus Locustae!"

The Death Eater on the right and the one on the left fell, convulsing, suffering as if from the bite of a Locusta snake. That left the one in the center with the opportunity to take revenge on one of them, but he hesitated about which one it should be.

They always did.

Lucius spun his wife around in front of him as if they were dancing, so that she presented her wand and then her back and then her wand, and their enemy oriented on her. Meanwhile, Lucius aimed his wand under Narcissa's lifted arm and cast the Locusta curse again. The Death Eater's eyes widened in an expression of surprise most amusing before he fell.

Narcissa finished her spin bound close to his body, and Lucius leaned in and kissed her harshly. Narcissa returned the kiss with equal force, laughing smugly into his mouth. They had the right to be smug, Lucius thought. The Locusta's Kiss maneuver was difficult to pull off, and had both elegance and deadliness. A glance to their left showed that Burke was looking at them with admiration.

"Would that more young witches and wizards today knew the true pureblood rituals," he murmured. "It's all that separates us from Mudbloods."

Lucius refrained from rolling his eyes, but only because Belville was striking a heroic pose beyond Burke and casting some complicated spell in a Celtic language that had no more apparent effect than a tripping jinx. That left it to the rest of them to finish the real work, while Belville cocked his head around at each of them, as if demanding they admire his learning. Ravenclaws, Lucius thought, with contemptuous resignation.

Narcissa charged beside him as they fought their way towards Woodhouse, and they had the chance to use the Locusta's Kiss again, as well as the Whirlwind Tango. Lucius could feel his heart beating hard in contentment, and he caught a glimpse of the same emotion in Narcissa's eyes.

This was the reason he had agreed to let his son go with Harry, in the hopes that Draco might have the opportunity to fight beside the young man he so obviously loved. Nothing bonded spouses like battle. If Draco had that kind of connection with their Potter after this evening, Lucius would be assured they were meant for each other just as they were.

If not...well.

There is still some time for Draco to learn lessons in the emotional control he needs.

Really, it was so easy to trick people.

Honorina reflected on that as she watched the sixth Death Eater in a row try to fight one of her illusions, and then she sneaked up behind the illusion and stuck the tip of her wand between his ribs. She murmured a Cutting Curse and he was down, just like that.

Or maybe the Dark Lord just couldn't get very good help, which was also a possibility, she supposed.

She glanced around, restless. She was with Snape's force, coming in from the east, and they were no doubt striking terror into the hearts of all and sundry. Snape was, at least. The man fought like one of the robots Honorina's mother had once described to her, all lethal precision and endless strength, striving to get to the center of the battle and hook up with the vates he loved like a son.

Honorina watched as Rhangnara used some highly complicated spell that appeared to tie his victim's guts up in knots, and then decided, quite clearly, that she no longer needed to stay with them.

She was bored. And she could do things that no one else could. And Harry might need her eyes.

She crouched, safe in the shade of an illusion, and then leaped. Her body tumbled and turned, melted and reformed, and she struck upwards, a sea-mew, seeing with clear eyes in the constantly renewed light of the fire that illuminated them all. If anyone caught

sight of her, they no doubt thought they were seeing another illusion, or maybe a stray bird wandered into the battle. That was because no one knew she was an Animagus. No one knew her secret. Honoria loved having secrets.

She canted to the north, towards the place that Harry and his honor guard would have come in on their broomsticks. No one was flying right now, so they must have landed already. Houses ringing with magic passed underneath her, and Honoria cackled, the sharp gull-laughter that irritated most people who did not realize what clever and dead useful birds gulls were.

She would find Harry and...help. Or, at the least, amuse herself. And if someone thought she was dead because of her disappearance, then she could always have the fun of reappearing "alive" later.

She hoped it was Belville who thought she was dead. She always wanted to surprise those who most deserved it.

Harry strode confidently towards the buildings that surrounded Woodhouse. Voldemort wasn't there. He saw no need to risk himself on the battlefield, perhaps. Or perhaps the traitor's communication, whatever it had been, hadn't even reached him. If he was in one of those private lairs Lucius had talked about, it was likely.

As he walked, Harry drew out the scrap of parchment from his robe pocket. "I solemnly swear I want to attack Woodhouse," he whispered, and the lines of an enchanted map appeared, racing across the paper until they formed an image of the valley. Harry grinned. He'd worked on this throughout the last half of the week. It was good to know that he hadn't lost his touch since he'd created the map of Godric's Hollow two years ago.

"What's that?" Draco asked, of course, trying to peer over Harry's shoulder.

Harry showed him the map, studying the dots still gathered in the midst of the quadrangle. Sure enough, no dot marked the Dark Lord's presence. There was Karkaroff—Harry curled his lip—and several names that Harry was only remotely familiar with from stories of the

First War, and several completely unfamiliar names that looked Russian, probably young Death Eaters from Durmstrang. No Bellatrix. Harry wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed on that score.

So, about twenty Death Eaters still lying in wait, then. It was probably Karkaroff who organized the defense. Harry shifted the map so that he could see it better in the light of the flames, and then frowned as he realized that a dot he'd simply assumed was a Death Eater had only one word beside it.

Siren.

Shit, Harry thought, and stared harder at the map. The siren's pool was within the quadrangle, against the southernmost building, nearly opposite from where they stood now, and past both Woodhouse itself and the waiting Death Eaters. He didn't know how to get there without a pitched battle.

Wait. Yes, I do.

Harry smiled and glanced at Regulus. "Get the spiders ready," he said. "There are Death Eaters who'll come flooding around that corner in a moment." He nodded at the corner nearest to them, which made Regulus jump and glance narrowly at him, noticing the map for the first time. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Sometimes, you really are Sirius's godson," he muttered.

Harry acknowledged the compliment with a small nod.

"Wait. That corner?" said John, who'd just come up behind them. Harry wondered briefly where Henrietta was, then discarded the worry. She could take care of herself if she was on their side, and if she wasn't, then his magic could take care of her. Either way, she was probably having more fun wherever she was.

"Yes, that corner," Harry replied, and then began to murmur, aloud for the benefit of those with him. "Aedifico spiritum cum odoratu et vibrare."

He smiled as Draco's eyes lit with recognition. This was the incantation that Connor had used to fool the dragons in the Triwizard Tournament. Harry watched as an illusion of himself formed next to him, so perfect that it made John start and glance at him in wonder. Harry sent the illusion forward with a wave of his hand, peeking around the corner of the building.

He heard Karkaroff's astonished shout, and then there came the sound of clattering footsteps, moving directly towards them, and of fired curses. Harry made his illusion run back around the corner, and then braced himself.

Regulus's spiders clicked their legs together.

Harry backed up a few steps, readying himself for a pull. Draco aimed his wand over his shoulder. Regulus's spiders scuttled forward, and the first Death Eaters screamed in surprise and agony as the venom entered their systems. Remembering how it felt to suffer from the spiders' poison, Harry couldn't resist a sympathetic shudder. He thought they would probably think what he did next to be more horrible, though.

He opened the serpent's jaws, and began to swallow their magic, carefully aiming above the spiders so that they could continue working. The two nearest Death Eaters, both of them small enough to be somewhere near Harry's age, fell to their knees crying out as Harry ripped their power away. Harry winced, and closed his eyes, but continued drawing. With Regulus and Draco right there, he couldn't take the chance that anything might hurt them.

When he thought he'd taken in enough magic, and Karkaroff and some of the others were hesitating to come around the corner because they feared their comrades' screams, Harry charged. Draco gave an indignant shout, which Harry ignored. Draco was perfectly capable of keeping up if he decided that he wanted to.

Around the corner, behind the building, in the shadow, and he could smell water, and see the edge of the siren's pool. Karkaroff was right there, aiming his wand with a shocked expression.

Harry spat out the magic he'd swallowed, and knocked the Death Eaters away like mice suffering from the swat of a cat's paw. He heard skulls crushed and spines snapping as they rolled. He put the knowledge of those sounds in the same place where he put the fact that he'd willed Fenrir Greyback out of existence by looking at him. He would accept, and deal with later, the fact that he had killed, painfully and numerous times.

That is what war is.

He ran through the newly clear area of earth, aiming for the pool. The bulk of Woodhouse loomed to the right, tempting him to look, so ablaze with magic that it made Harry want to wonder and sing. But he had to stop the siren first, and he was probably the only one who could.

Draco and Regulus were right behind him, John panting on their heels. Harry passed Woodhouse, and saw a shape moving between the eastern and southern buildings, near the far shore of the siren's pool. He felt his heart lift when he realized it was Snape. His force had broken through whatever guards had been waiting on the far side of the valley.

And then the siren burst out of the pool, wrapped her arms around Snape's waist, and pulled him into the water, singing as she went. Ignifer stopped fighting when she heard the song.

It twisted around her mind, so lovely that tears were streaking her cheeks before she realized it. She put a hand over her face, shuddering. Memories sprang up in her mind like blades of grass, memories of light and goodness before she'd turned her back on the Light she was raised in, Declaring for the Dark.

She could have that home back, whispered the singing voice. She could have her parents back, not her father as he'd become, stern and proud and inflexible, and not the indifferent mother who talked to her from the fireplace every day, but her parents as they'd been when she was a little girl, furiously proud of her. She found herself taking a step forward, shivering all the while, longing.

A hand caught her arm. Ignifer struck out blindly, trying to hurt whoever held her. She needed to go to the song, the singer. She needed to follow the path that had suddenly opened in front of her heart.

Then another song rose. It did not exactly combat the first. It twined around it, and turned it, exposing it to the light like a jewel. It let Ignifer see the flaws in that music, how false it was—not a jewel, but paste. Her head cleared, and she stood, blinking, with Arabella Zabini's hand on her arm and the Songstress's voice throbbing in the air around her.

"What was that?" Ignifer demanded, then realized the question was foolish; Zabini was too busy singing, and preventing the song from snaring her again, to answer her. The others in their force were waking from what looked like similar trances, shaking their heads. Adalrico Bulstrode frowned.

"The song is coming from there," he said, nodding to the buildings. "I think we should pursue it. Whatever it is can harm our vates." He began to stride, the air around him turning steadily darker. Ignifer frowned, then shrugged. There were rumors of magical gifts in the Bulstrode line, magic they usually hid.

And then Adalrico's words caught up with her.

Something that might hurt Harry.

Ignifer hurtled forward. She had just found this alliance. She was not about to lose it.

Zabini followed her, still cocooning her in the song, battling what Ignifer now realized must be the voice of a siren—

And then that voice stopped.

Harry didn't think as he heard the splash. He didn't think as he heard the song. Visions were trying to fill his head, but nothing could compare to that too-real, too-present memory of Snape going down

to his probable death, the siren's arms wrapped around him and her beautiful face upturned to watch his as it went slack.

He found himself leaving the ground, or rushing through it, a trick he hadn't performed since his third year, when he ran to Hogwarts from the Forbidden Forest to save Draco from one of the Black snakes. He just barely remembered to cast a charm that would let him breathe underwater before he plunged into the pool.

Unlike the Hogwarts lake, where he'd been last year, this was perfectly clear, and the throbbing bursts of Ignifer's fire overhead irradiated it like beams of sunlight. Harry could see the siren on the far side, drifting near an obviously magically-constructed bank of stone. She sang and sang, her voice thick as the water was. She had her gaze and her grip locked on Snape, who was not breathing.

Harry flung the breathing charm. Snape coughed, and then his chest began to heave, bubbles trailing from his mouth.

The siren snapped her head around, her gaze locking on him. Harry felt her song shift the same way. Now she wasn't launching it towards Snape, or towards whatever audience might hear her; she was focusing on him and only him.

The visions came crowding back again, trying to enchant and snare Harry with images of a perfect childhood, a good relationship with his parents, an existence entirely ignored by everyone, if only he would come to the siren and touch her. Harry found it as hard to resist, for just a moment, as he had the song of the many-legged creature in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. This siren was free of a web, her voice unrestricted, and she belonged to a kindred of magical creatures made to compel.

Then Harry's hatred of compulsion kicked in, and he bucked his mind and threw off the strands of song. The siren's eyes, large and shining green, met his. Harry tossed his thought like a spear through their connected gazes.

I am vates. Hear me! Voldemort fooled you. He set your kind free only to enchant and hurt wizards. I have freed others. Look into my

heart and see the truth. Look now. I am the breaker and unbinder of webs. The one you hold is my guardian, and if you do not release him, I will kill you, though I wish magical creatures nothing but good.

The siren heard him, or perhaps she heard and understood the impulse of freedom in his mind; Harry had never believed anything more sincerely in his life. She cried out, a musical sound that luckily did not resemble her song enough to harm anyone, and her arms loosened on Snape's waist. He drifted in the water. Harry swam up to him and draped himself underneath his arm, never looking away from the siren.

Her voice crept into his mind, a timid little girl's voice, rising and falling in waves like the ocean or the restless shifting of her fish's tail. Is it true? He tricked us? We were not going after rightful prey, but only his enemies?

That is true, Harry affirmed. He would never have allowed you to enchant or compel the wizards that follow him. He did not offer sirens true freedom, but a new web.

I must tell the others of this. We are free, and we wish to sing. We must have the freedom to drown whomever we wish.

The siren hurtled away, speeding smoothly towards a low entrance in the bank of the pool that Harry hadn't noticed before. She ducked into it and was gone, with a flirt of her tail.

Harry heaved out a breath, and then swam for the surface, dragging Snape along with him. It wasn't easy with only one hand to guide his way, but other hands grabbed him when he got to the surface, and Draco and Regulus helped him back into the open air. Harry let the water-breathing charm go, and turned anxiously to Snape as Regulus laid him out on the back of the pool, murmuring, "Finite Incantatem. Ennervate."

Snape coughed, spewing out quite a lot of water, and sat up. Harry ended the water-breathing charm on him, and met his eyes.

"Imbecile," Snape spat.

Harry found himself smiling. “That settles the question of whether you’re all right, then,” he said, and had to shut his eyes. “Merlin, sir, I—“

Wings sounded close above his head suddenly, and Harry spun. He saw a gull, diving, which became a woman, falling. And he saw Karkaroff on his feet, his wand aimed, anger terrible on his face.

He saw the moment when the Slicing Curse that should have cut into his unprotected back took Honoria across the stomach instead, as she tumbled between him and the line of the spell.

In a moment, everything changed. Honoria lay on the ground, bleeding, cut open from shoulder to groin, organs steaming slightly in the cold air. Harry recognized the Curse—he’d last seen it when Rabastan Lestrange had used it on Connor in the lake last year—and he felt very cold. He raised his head, eyes raking from Honoria to Karkaroff.

Karkaroff turned pale at the feeling of Harry’s magic rising, or perhaps just the look in his eyes; he was a Legilimens, after all. He backed away one step, then two, then screamed, in a voice amplified by the Sonorus spell, “Retreat! Now!”

The night rang as those Death Eaters who could still Apparate fled. Harry heard the sounds of battle cease, falling into confusion and then shouts that were probably either of surprise or victory.

He could share neither. He knelt next to Honoria, and she bled, dying before his eyes. She had her eyes open, though, and she was smiling at him.

“Why should you—“ she asked, with an obvious effort, then had to stop, panting. “Why should you get to have all the fun of taking a curse for someone else?” she asked, as if determined to get it all out in one sentence, and then her head fell back. Her eyes closed.

“Fawkes,” Harry said, his voice distorted by emotions beyond any other expression.

Wings fluttered above his head, again. This time, they accompanied fire, and the crooning song of a phoenix who landed on Honoria's unwounded shoulder and leaned over her injury. Harry cast pressure charms to hold the blood in, his mind blasted dull and numb with shock. Fawkes's tears fell, faster than, or just as fast as, Honoria's breathing slowed; Harry could not decide their relative speeds.

The shock gave way to mourning, cutting at him like a knife slicing through one tendon at a time, and he had to wonder, the words forming in his thoughts as though out of a vortex, Is this the way other people felt when I took the curse for Connor?

He swallowed multiple times as he did what he could to assist Fawkes, which wasn't much—mostly holding the blood in and knitting a little torn skin back together. Horror and pain together echoed twice over through his soul, both for Honoria and for the thought of Draco, or Snape, or anyone, really, suffering the same emotions on his account.

I didn't know. Oh, Merlin, I didn't know. If they really consider me as important as anyone else—or at least as important as I consider Honoria—then that means they felt this. Oh, Merlin.

He heard others arriving, but their voices silenced as they neared, save for whispered conversations that Harry didn't look up long enough to notice. He did look up when someone knelt down next to him, though, and blinked when he realized it was Thomas Rhangnara, his face for once serious.

"May I help?" he asked softly. "There are healing spells I've studied that might prove useful."

Harry nodded, and Thomas began to murmur in what wasn't Latin, tracing his wand above the path the Slicing Curse had created on Honoria's abdomen. Harry watched for only a moment before turning back to his own tasks. He could not tell for certain how much effect they had. He only knew that Honoria was still breathing.

Then he realized that Draco's hand was on his shoulder, and that Fawkes had stopped crying, and Thomas was saying, "Harry? She's stable. She needs Hogwarts and your mediwitch as soon as possible, but she'll survive until we can get her there. Have one of the Malfoys Apparate her. They're good at that. I noticed when we jumped into the battle."

Harry sat back on his heels, drew in a breath that never seemed to end, and nodded. He rose, meeting Snape's eyes, and Regulus's, and Draco's. He was alive. He would survive.

Now to see who else was.

Pair after pair of eyes around the circle, and it looked as though nearly everyone was alive. Tybalt's right arm hung uselessly by his side, but he embraced John with his left, eyes tightly closed with what Harry thought was more relief than pain. Arabella Zabini limped, but her eyes were as proud as ever when Harry met them. Narcissa, though unsmiling, shifted so that Harry could see the burn on her left shoulder didn't prevent her from moving.

Then the werewolves arrived, with a lioness pacing beside them: Hawthorn, Moony, a black bitch with one ear missing who must be Claudia Griffinsnest, and one other, a golden one. One missing.

Harry closed his eyes, acknowledging the blow of a death, and counted them one more time. Henrietta was there now, too, strolling up with a faint smile on her lips, all five of their brooms floating behind her. She inclined her head when Harry met her eyes. She looked exhausted, but fully satisfied. Harry decided not to ask. She could tell him all the details, if she wanted him to know, later.

"We'll be going back to Hogwarts," he said quietly. "First, though, I want to secure Woodhouse against repossession by the Death Eaters." He glanced around distractedly for his map. Draco held it up on his second glance. Harry smiled a thanks he knew probably looked tired and took it, scanning it for more dots.

He shook his head. Save for names he recognized, and the motionless dots lying out beyond the quadrangle, there was no one in

the valley. No Muggles, then. When Karkaroff got wind of the attack, he'd probably moved them, if they'd ever been here in the first place.

They had Woodhouse, though, and that was not a small prize—

Though not worth someone's life, his conscience whispered at him.

Harry told it to shut up, since this was war, and lifted his head, closing his eyes. He knew that one of the people watching him at this moment was most likely a traitor, unless Voldemort had used the scar connection to get wind of the attack. As yet, he had no idea of knowing who it was, beyond instinctive certainty that it wasn't Snape, Regulus, Draco, or any of his older allies, and a revulsion against thinking it might be Honoria. Therefore, he wasn't about to tell anyone how he intended to secure Woodhouse.

It didn't take long. The spells on the great wooden building interacted with the magic of the valley, in patterns that Harry learned to understand after a moment of gazing at them. He wove wards around Woodhouse, and then across the valley, carefully putting them just outside the patterns of magical interaction already present. The wards were to fire, and tighten into impenetrable shields, the moment anyone but him tried to enter, by walking, Apparition, Portkey, Flooing into the house, or on a broom. The last might have been a problem, but by wrapping the wards entirely around the valley, encasing it in a huge bubble, Harry avoided triggering the spells that would have disrupted the intricate communication between Woodhouse and the natural rock and trees.

This was a truly remarkable place, Harry thought, with interest that he knew would increase when he wasn't so bloody exhausted. Whoever had fashioned the original wards was a genius. He would have to study it in more detail later.

"How are we going to get out?" Henrietta asked, with a frown in her voice.

Harry opened his eyes, and saw a sheen of moonlight across the valley, binding them in. He smiled slightly. "We can Apparate out," he said. "But you shouldn't try to Apparate in after this."

Henrietta's eyebrows raised. Harry didn't give her the satisfaction of an answer. He would have to root out the traitor first, before he dared tell the wards who they could let through.

He turned to Narcissa, only to find that she was already taking Honoria into her arms. She nodded to him. Harry relaxed.

To his surprise, what came boiling up as Regulus gathered his spiders, Fawkes fluttered to his shoulder, some of his allies moved to Side-Along Apparate the werewolves, and he gripped his Firebolt, was not relief, or weariness, but rage.

Someone warned them. If not for that, whichever one of my Light allies died would still be alive, and Snape wouldn't nearly have drowned, and Honoria wouldn't have taken that curse. When I find that person, he or she will be lucky if they don't suffer Greyback's fate.

Chapter Thirty: Denouement

"She'll live for now," said Madam Pomfrey softly, pulling the sheet up around Honoria and stepping back from the bed.

Harry nodded. He had to bite his tongue to keep from asking if the mediwitch was sure. She wasn't sure, or she would have said outright that Honoria was going to live. She wouldn't torment him with uncertainty if there was no reason to do so. Besides, Harry had no doubt that Madam Pomfrey would watch throughout the night and try to keep Honoria alive.

He would have watched himself, but Tybalt, John, and Madam Pomfrey were all staying, and there was someone who needed him more. As the matron went to fetch healing potions for Honoria, Harry turned and met Draco's eyes. Draco was hovering near the entrance to the hospital wing, now and then staring at one of the beds as if he would like to collapse into it.

"Come on," Harry said softly, stepping up beside him and offering an arm.

Draco accepted with a single look of gratitude so rich that Harry winced. Merlin, the things that must be running through his mind right now.

Lucius and Narcissa had already left. Lucius had simply given a single, proud smile when Draco told them about using the Unforgivable, and why he'd used it. Narcissa had touched her son's cheek, but looked back and forth between him and Harry, and not spoken a word. Harry was not sure if that meant she didn't think Draco needed to recover, or trusted that Harry would help heal him better than she could.

And that, at least, Harry thought he could do. He'd killed for the first time much more recently than any of the elder Malfoys. They'd be recalling old memories, and probably not much sympathy. They'd try to urge Draco past the fact of this first death before he was ready. Harry would not.

Together, they slowly made their way back to the Slytherin common room. It was late Saturday night, late enough that even the students most bent on excitement had gone to bed, and none of the few slumped in chairs or on couches stirred as Draco and Harry went by. Harry divided his attention between the floor in front of him and Draco's face. It was hard to see either in the low light of the fires.

They reached their bedroom at last. Harry half-feared Blaise would be waiting up to demand an account of the battle—and his reaction to the Killing Curse probably wouldn't be a helpful one for Draco's state of mind—but steady, soft snores came through his curtains. Harry sighed and helped Draco gently into his own bed, then cast a silencing charm and climbed up beside him, kneeling on the sheets rather than getting under them. Draco had his arms wrapped around his chest now, as if he didn't want to be touched. Harry could understand that.

"How do you stand it?" Draco whispered.

Progress. At least he would speak about it, rather than Harry needing to drag it out of him.

Harry said softly, "I found it difficult at first. The one it hit me hardest with was Dragonsbane, but Mulciber was—hard in a different way. I tried all the arguments on myself. Necessity. It was the only way to kill him. He would have hurt other people if I didn't kill him. He was a Death Eater, so I was doing the world a favor."

Draco turned his head inch by inch, until he faced Harry. Harry put out his hand in spite of himself, smoothing it over Draco's forehead and into his hair. Draco sighed, and the tight clutch of his arms around his body relaxed a bit. "And did they work?" he asked.

"No," Harry said.

Draco frowned and started to move as though he would throw off the touch, then subsided under it. "Then how did you live?"

Harry hesitated. He wasn't sure his way would be the best way for Draco to handle the problem.

“Tell me, Harry. Please.”

Harry closed his eyes. “Because pain doesn’t stop, Draco,” he said. “There are always going to be things to be endured. I just—I think most people live, sometimes, like they’re going to get through the pain or the onerous tasks of daily life into some legendary time and place where they can do nothing but relax and drift in bliss. I know that’s not true. The relaxation does end. The onerous tasks are usually life itself, not something to be pushed aside so you can enjoy life. The pain needs to be got through because it just has to. Putting my head down and pushing is the way I live.”

“Or running in front and dragging the rest of us along behind you,” Draco said, with a slight chuckle.

Better than I thought, Harry realized, relaxing. He can joke. How long was it before I felt like doing that after Mulciber? The death of Rodolphus didn’t really count, to Harry’s mind, both because he’d been unconscious for so long afterwards and because he’d had many, many emotions to sort out from that night, not just his slaying of the Death Eater. But for Draco, the dominant impression of this battle would be that he had killed for the first time.

“True,” Harry murmured, and then opened his eyes in startlement as Draco pulled at his arm. “Draco, what—“

“Get under the covers with me,” Draco said. “Please, Harry?”

Moving slowly, because Draco’s earlier attitude had indicated just how little he wanted to be touched, Harry did as he asked. The moment he lay down, Draco rolled over, grabbed him, and held him close, shuddering a bit as his arms wrapped around Harry’s waist and back. Harry forced himself to relax, muscle by muscle, and placed his hand on Draco’s shoulder.

“I can’t entirely regret it,” Draco whispered. “And I think I can put my head down and push through like I need to, Harry, as long as you’re here. If she wasn’t dead, you would be. And I would do anything to prevent that.”

Harry shuddered and tried to rear back slightly. He couldn't move. The warmth pushing in from Draco's body seemed to have inundated his mind as well. He felt flayed, stripped to the bone, seen. He liked it better when Draco concentrated on himself. But he was too close, and too aware of what this meant to Draco, to do anything but meet the gray eyes staring feverishly into his.

"I love you," Draco whispered, and then closed his eyes. Perhaps the closeness was too much for him, too. Or perhaps the warmth and the reassurance and the closeness combined with the battle exhaustion dropped him off. Harry heard him lightly snoring a few moments later.

He waited some time, then tried to move gently away. Draco's arms were so tightly wrapped around him that he couldn't. Harry laid his head back down, and was immediately pulled in even tighter.

Harry swallowed and tried to ignore the prickling of his skin, the instincts screaming at him that he felt too good and needed to move out of danger now. At least he didn't think he was in any danger of going to sleep. He stared over Draco's head at his curtains and the underside of the four-poster, and made himself remember the moment when Greyback had vanished from existence.

At least he had been right. There was that meager comfort. His magic could do such things, and he had been right to run away and recover his temper rather than doing them to Margaret. If he had looked at her right after he knew that she hurt Argutus, would he have spoken her name, commanded her to meet his eyes? Would she have popped out of existence like Greyback did?

And he still didn't regret killing Greyback. But he would have regretted killing her.

He used the hours when he lay there and could do nothing but stare and think to sort through his emotions, carefully tucking them into place, analyzing them and learning what he should do from them. He was powerful. So it behooved him to keep tight, careful control of his power. His anger at the traitor notwithstanding, he wasn't about to march off and start accusing or killing people. He would maintain his

secrets instead, question his allies subtly, let them know he was watching, and, next time, use a system of multiple plans, checks, and traps. Or false plans, false attacks, even. See what got reported and what didn't.

He wasn't bound magically to his newest allies—though, after the battles, the bonds of life debts connected him to Ignifer and Honoria, just waiting for them to claim them—but he had made promises it would be awkward and insulting to break off with no explanation. Insult someone badly enough on the suspicion of a breach, have it not be true, and other Dark families would either stay neutral or attack him because of their ties to the person he'd insulted, whether or not they joined the Death Eaters. A misstep in the dance now, just when he was entering the wider arena of politics, was not something he could afford.

So he would restrain himself. He had always known he had to. This simply added another, excellent reason.

Tight and tame and lashed, Harry smoothed out his emotions, and swallowed them, and made them lie still. He didn't sleep, but by the time the sun rose and Draco's arms finally loosened enough for him to crawl out of bed and go back to the hospital wing, he was convinced he'd accomplished something more valuable.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry started and lifted his head from his cradled arms. He'd sat a few hours' watch by Honoria's bed while Madam Pomfrey got some sleep. Tybalt and John had left for home just after he arrived, still angry and worried, but content to surrender their friend to Harry's eyes and the mediwitch's care. The first thought Harry had, on hearing a voice he didn't immediately recognize, was that it might be John.

But it wasn't. A man with an oddly-accented voice, oddly familiar face, and oddly ragged white-blond hair stood in the doorway of the hospital wing. His eyes were yellow, and fastened on Harry's face with—keenness, was the only way Harry could define the emotion. Keen curiosity? Keen rage? Keen interest? Some of all of those.

“Sir?” Harry asked. “Can I help you?”

“I can help you, and that is the more important question.” Now that the man had recognized him, he seemed to relax, and he certainly had no hesitation about striding further into the hospital wing, drawing up a chair, and sitting down next to Harry. “My name is Paton Opalline. Fergus Opalline was my son.”

Harry shut his eyes and winced. He had confirmed, after they had Apparated back to Hogwarts, that the werewolf who had died in Hawthorn’s attack was Fergus, not Delilah Gloryflower or Claudia Griffinsnest. “I am sorry for your loss, sir,” he said softly. “Do you really still wish to help me?”

There was a reflective pause, and then Paton said, “I see that Fergus told you nothing about his family. Well, he may have been ashamed, though what he became was not his fault. He did—Mr. Potter, would you please open your eyes and look at me? I feel odd talking to your bowed head. I assure you, I do not blame you. Fergus made his choice to fight, and he fell in the doing so, willingly, facing enemies. I am very proud of him.”

Harry blinked and looked up. That’s why his hair is so ragged, he thought. He’s chopped it in mourning for his son. Some of the Light pureblood families did that. “I—I don’t understand, sir. I would have thought you would want to withdraw from the war, to not risk getting any more of your family killed. Besides,” he added, “though I know Fergus wanted to help me because I sent him Wolfsbane, I am unaware of any debt you owe me.”

Paton shook his head. “It’s true that we were planning to keep out of the war at first, because of what we are,” he said. “But now, one of our sons has died for you, Mr. Potter. Blood was given. Willingly.” He paused, but Harry went on staring at him blankly, not knowing what to say. For the first time, he was really regretting not studying the customs of Light pureblood families in depth. He’d spent much more time on the Dark customs, because Lily had simply assumed that the Light wizards would follow Connor automatically, while Harry would

need to persuade and bind and convince the Dark ones to become allies. Harry felt very ignorant of everything right at the moment.

The exhaustion and the worry over Honoria probably aren't helping, he thought, wiping at his eyes.

"What are you?" he asked.

Paton smiled. "Old Blood, Mr. Potter. Have you heard of us?"

Harry chased a memory for a moment. But no, though he'd read the term, it had always been in the context of historical background, no more important for him to grasp what was happening in the wizarding world today than the names of Muggle kings nine hundred years ago were. Besides, his greatest historical background was in the First War with Voldemort, the one with Grindelwald, and everything else that might pertain to the struggle of Light and Dark. From what Paton was saying, Old Blood was outside that. "Not enough to know what you're talking about, sir."

Paton smiled more widely and shook back his sleeves. Then he bent his head and breathed on his wrists.

Harry watched in wonder as a glamour he hadn't even sensed melted away, revealing Paton's previously unmarked skin as writhing with tattoos. Harry couldn't see a pattern to them. They were simply endless dark lines, perhaps deep blue or purple or green, twining and intertwining and making their way up his arms until they vanished into his robes. Harry looked up and saw that similar swirls adorned Paton's face. There, though, they seemed to move in harmony with his features, forming dark green concentric circles around his eyes, blossoming into whirls of gold and red on his cheeks, dipping into yellow near his chin and blue on his throat.

"What do those mean, sir?" he asked.

Paton sat back with a shake of his head that moved his ragged hair from side to side, looking half-smug and half-eager to explain. "Old Blood, Mr. Potter. We're part of the fifth dimension of Dark and Light, one that isn't spoken about so much anymore, with all the debates on

free will and compulsion. Peace and war,” he elaborated, when Harry looked at him blankly. “We rarely fight in wars. They kill our family. And we don’t like that. We would rather concentrate on growing.”

Harry eyed the tattoos on Paton’s wrists and cheeks. “And those—those represent your family, sir?”

“Yes, they do.” Paton traced one finger over the gold and red rosette on his left cheek. “One line for everyone born with the name of Opalline, or from the womb of a woman who married into another family, or a female descendant of one of those daughters. Our family is very great, Mr. Potter, because we accepted certain limitations on ourselves. At one point, most of the Light families were Old Blood, sworn to peace, not to war. If two wizards did have a conflict, they might fight duels, usually not lethal, and the punishment for killing a pregnant woman was to be Obliviated, turned into a child, and bound to the family the dead woman had come from. That was as violent as we got. Aurum exilis, cognatio abundans, has been the Opalline motto for sixteen hundred years, the length of time we have been sworn to the Light and have been Old Blood. In gold poor, in blood rich.”

Harry tried to imagine the amount of children a long-lived Light wizarding family intent on producing more children and avoiding conflict might have, and failed. “Why did the other Light families turn away from being Old Blood?”

Paton shrugged, though his face darkened with a shadow of old anger. “They wanted money, political power, vengeance—to be able to challenge the Dark pureblooded families on their own ground. Of course there are not as many riches when we give the money we accumulate towards the upkeep, rescue, saving, and protection of our own family, and when we are so many. But we are still Old Blood. We have not abandoned our vows, and in return for that, we have a deep connection such as the others will never understand. There are Opallines everywhere, Mr. Potter. And now that one of our own has willingly given his blood to your cause, we consider you an honorary family member. Blood shed over you rather than blood running through your veins, if you will.”

Harry shook his head slightly. "But if you can't fight—"

"I did think you would see it as soon as I mentioned it, Mr. Potter." Paton gave him a deep smile, eyes narrowed and smug. "We are everywhere, and of course everyone knows that relatives gossip. And most of our enemies are unaware of just how connected we stay. Our spy network is unparalleled." He tipped his head. "That is what I intend to give you access to, Mr. Potter—cousins and second cousins, siblings and half-siblings, children and parents bound together all over Great Britain, Ireland, and Europe. We originated on the Isle of Man, and that is still my seat as family leader, but we did not stay there."

That's his accent, then. He's Manx. Harry grabbed and held on to that bit of knowledge. He wanted to hold on to something in the sliding mist of fatigue his mind had become.

"Your offer is wonderfully generous, sir," he said.

Paton shook his head. "It is only what you should have, now. When you sent the Wolfsbane, you gave our son the ability to choose peace once again. For that, we would have to thank you. But then he died in a chosen battle, using the beast's form and the savagery that he could not help having to fulfill a goal of the Light. Mr. Potter, that makes you a part of our family. You enabled Fergus to make himself useful and good, instead of sinking into despair."

"I didn't know I was doing it," Harry muttered. He looked over at Honoria to disguise the expression on his face, but had the feeling Paton could still see his blush. Honoria breathed on, oblivious. Harry found himself envying her.

"But that is what makes you worthy of this gift," said Paton. "I wanted to tell you this, Mr. Potter. We would only fight to defend ourselves—and even then, we prefer to avoid Dark Arts and other magic that would break our vows—but you are one of us, and we can certainly spy for you." He stood. "Are there any other questions that you wish to ask me?"

"I—no." Harry thought about saying that he was the one responsible for Fergus's death, but he doubted that Paton would take that well. And perhaps it was the enemy werewolves who were responsible. Perhaps he could learn to think like that. "Thank you for coming, sir."

"I will mourn Fergus forever," Paton said softly. "But I have the living to think of first, all my family. And that includes you now, Mr. Potter. Our letters are open to you, and our hearths and homes, should you ever need them." He hesitated, and Harry found himself wondering what else the man had to say.

He found out when Paton began in a low, faltering voice.

"Mr. Potter, I have no idea how you truly feel on the matter, as I no longer trust the Daily Prophet to report the truth, if it ever did. But my family possesses spells that set aright the wrongs between blood kin. That includes spells that punish parents who do the hideous things that your parents did to you."

Harry jerked his head up. "Would the Wizengamot or the Ministry consider those spells sufficient punishment to forego execution or imprisonment?"

"They would not," Paton said. "These spells are means of personal redress, Mr. Potter, justice, not vengeance and not legality."

"Then, thank you, but no," said Harry, turning away and leaning down near Honoria's bed again. He told himself there was a slight change in her breathing. It had sped up a little. Was that a good thing? He would have to ask Madam Pomfrey. He would have to learn medical magic. He didn't want to just kill and wish people out of existence. "I will contact you for other things, though, Mr. Opalline."

"I understand," said Paton. "They are still your blood." Harry heard him breathe again, probably to erase the tattoos and restore the glamour, and then his hand glanced over Harry's shoulder. "Should you ever change your mind, I would be most happy to teach you the spells myself."

Harry just nodded, not trusting himself to speak, and Paton turned and left.

Harry tugged the blanket up over Honoria and then went to fetch one of Madam Pomfrey's books. He wanted the mediwitch to get some more sleep, still. He might as well use the time for something productive, and begin to study on the means of combating the wounds left by battle curses.

"Harry. Are you quite well? You look exhausted."

Harry froze for a moment as Narcissa's arms closed around him in a tight hug, but then forced himself to relax. He'd sat by Honoria's bed most of the morning, until Madam Pomfrey awakened, and then left and contacted Narcissa. On the way, and while he waited for her, he avoided Connor, Snape, Draco—assuming Draco was awake yet—and others who could have told that he hadn't slept. They would only tell him to go to bed, which wasn't useful. He hadn't realized Narcissa, who, after all, had seen him just last night, could tell.

"I've been to bed, Mrs. Malfoy," he said, which was perfectly true, and then sat down in the chair facing hers. McGonagall had granted them the use of a small anteroom usually used for private talks between professors and seventh-year students who were going into their fields on leaving Hogwarts. "I wanted to talk to you about the attack last night, and who might have betrayed us." He'd thought about it, and decided there was no ways that Narcissa was the traitor. She might abandon him, but she would never abandon or endanger Draco.

Narcissa sat down, eyes still fixed on his face in a way Harry didn't much like. "You want my opinion on our allies?"

Harry sighed. "Yes. I am tempted to suspect Henrietta Bulstrode, since her magic is so strong she could practically count on surviving the battle no matter how much danger she put herself in, and I distrust her. But perhaps I am letting personal motives blind me."

"Perhaps," Narcissa murmured. "I will tell you the reasons I brought them into the alliance, Harry. Perhaps that will help."

“Honorina Peverley is a skilled illusionist, deeper than she lets on, and more useful. I think you saw that last night,” she added dryly. “I wanted her for her fighting skill, and to show some of the people who might hesitate to join an army of purebloods that you were not at all averse to fighting beside halfbloods and Gryffindors. Igniter Apollonis, much the same. When she once fixes her loyalty, she does not change her mind easily. She’s resisted entreaties from her family for more than a decade to change her allegiance back, resisted a sterility curse, resisted all the impulses of her childhood telling her that Dark wizards were evil. And she serves as a useful symbol of the alliance’s fluid nature.”

Narcissa leaned back and closed her eyes. “Those were my easy choices. Charles Rosier-Henlin—there was the risk that he might not like you, or might decide that you were not strong enough. But he has invented several new spells that I know of, and I respect his hidden strength. And I think that he is now firmly committed to you.

“Thomas Rhanvara is intelligent, capable of research that might serve us well, a good persuader, and in contact with wizards in India who might be useful if the Dark Lord takes the fight to other countries. Also, his wife Priscilla is a good eye on affairs in the Ministry.

“Mortimer Belville is more important for his family than himself. Speaking of which,” Narcissa added abruptly, opening her eyes and reaching into her robe, “I have letters from the Belville family for you. The battle last night impressed them; it is the kind of test they have been waiting for you to pass.” Harry accepted the letters, wishing he did not feel so much as if they might bite, and nodded. “Edward Burke’s cousins are rich, and there is at least the chance that they will pass money and information along, now that they have seen how well you treat their most annoying relative. They have written you as well.” Narcissa gave him another envelope.

“And Henrietta?” Harry asked quietly.

Narcissa hesitated for a long moment. Then she said, “Harry, I feared that people would think us weak if I did not approach her. She is too obvious a candidate to omit from an alliance, especially one that already contained her second cousin Adalrico. There is a reason that

the Dark Lord tried to recruit her. Powerful in magic, notorious for acting in her own interest most of the time but giving everything for those causes she adopts as her own—did you know that she saved Elfrida's life?"

Harry blinked, once or twice. Then he said, "No."

Narcissa nodded. "Adalrico had angered another Death Eater. I still don't know for certain which one. In those days, I tried to avoid Death Eater talk and business as much as possible, not wanting Lucius's Lord to think I should be Marked. At any rate, he invaded Adalrico's house and tried to kidnap or kill Elfrida while she was pregnant with Millicent. Henrietta, however, likes Elfrida, even if that does not extend to liking all the things Elfrida values. She had set up spells to warn her of such an occurrence, unlikely as it might seem to happen. She arrived in some manner that was not Apparating—Adalrico has never been able to explain that to me properly—and utterly destroyed the Death Eater. Adalrico told me that he found a layer of flesh, blood, and bone exactly one inch thick coating every surface of a particular room."

Harry winced. He didn't know what Dark magic Henrietta might have used to achieve that particular effect, but he could envision the results all too well. "I had no idea she liked Elfrida."

Narcissa shrugged. "She sees no reason to announce it. But I thought that was another reason she might agree to join us, once she heard that Elfrida was in the alliance and bound to you formally. She is extremely dangerous, Harry. I will not lie to you about that. She will find every way of fighting a bridle and rein that she can. But if she decides that she likes you, there is no one I would trust more at your back."

"Not Draco?"

Narcissa smiled slightly. "My son is a special case. Draco more, then. But no one else. She is magically stronger than Lucius, and more deadly than Severus, because she does not possess his scruples. I think it extremely probable that she might have betrayed you, though I did not believe she would go quite this far. But if she did, it was likely

as part of a test. If you pass the test, she will be a step closer to deciding to join with us completely.”

Harry frowned. “There were odd gaps in the counterattack,” he said. “They only sent seven flyers up to strike at us, and I would think there would be more, since Henrietta was there, and they’d want someone to counter her as well as me. I’m surprised Karkaroff didn’t come himself.”

Narcissa nodded. “They took out the Muggles, but they did not lay an effective ambush. Curious, when they seemed to know most of the details of our attack. They were not surprised by the fact that we struck from three directions, for example. And they sent inexperienced werewolves to face Hawthorn and the others, when they should have had Greyback and his mate there.” Harry flinched at the mention of Greyback’s name, but Narcissa didn’t seem to notice. “Perhaps, Harry, the traitor left deliberate gaps in his or her communication.”

“But we can’t know that, can we?”

Narcissa bowed her head. “No. We can’t. Perhaps it was someone who meant to betray us, but was simply ineffective about doing so.”

Harry scowled. He couldn’t think who would have done that. Some of his allies were more intelligent than the others, there was no doubt about that, but they’d all been present at the meeting and known the details of the attack on Woodhouse. They could have given all sorts of damaging information away. Karkaroff, with advance notice and the time to summon more Death Eaters to the site of the battle than Harry would have fighters, should have crushed them. Harry’s magic might have been the only thing to tip the balance.

Perhaps the ineffectiveness was on Voldemort’s side, he conceded. But there is no way to know that, either.

“I’ll be constructing some double blinds,” he told Narcissa. “But you think there is no one I should remove from the alliance just yet?”

“That is your choice, Harry,” Narcissa murmured. “Now, for example, that Burke’s and Belville’s families have responded to you, you could remove them from the alliance by a few slow and careful rituals. I would not recommend doing that with Henrietta. She would take it as an insult, and she would almost certainly strike at Draco or your brother in retaliation.”

Harry gnawed his lip for a moment. Burke and Belville were both good enough fighters to go into two battles and come away unscathed. He supposed he should at least consider retaining them for that.

But if one of them betrayed us, got Honoria injured and Fergus killed...

Harry swallowed and shoved down the rage. He really did just want to let go, to let his fury-filled magic fly, or to haul the likely suspects in and use Veritaserum on them, but he recognized the lure, and the danger, of that path. Those were the kinds of decisions Dumbledore had made, when he first decided to start sacrificing principle and conscience to necessity. Harry would not walk in his footsteps.

“Double-blind for now,” he told Narcissa. “I’ll tell them I’m planning an attack I’m really not, and see if I can catch them out by what Voldemort’s forces do in response to that information.”

“That is probably for the best,” Narcissa said, and sighed. “At least I can say that I do not suspect our Light allies. Laura Gloryflower would be incapable of an act that endangered fighters of your age, and Hawthorn will vouch for her fellow werewolves.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy.”

“Narcissa, Harry. I did grant you permission to call me by my first name.” Narcissa’s voice was abruptly full of compassion. “You do not yet feel comfortable enough to do so consistently. I have faith that you comforted my son after the battle. Did anyone comfort you, Harry?”

Harry stiffened and lifted his head. “Of course, madam. Draco did.”

Narcissa studied his eyes. Harry stared back. What he said was nothing but the truth, and he willed her to see that.

"You always get more formal when you want to shut someone out, Harry," Narcissa said.

Harry clamped down on his shifting emotions, the impulses to get angry or explode into denial. They were only the results of his exhaustion following a long night of battle. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Malfoy," he said. "I am tired, I'll not deny that, but I am glad that as many of us survived unscathed as did, and I'll be happier having something like the traitor's identity to dig into. How is the burn on your shoulder?" he asked, deliberately shifting the subject.

"Healed already. Poppy Pomfrey is a wonder with a wand." Narcissa stood and hugged him again before he could move away. "Please promise me that you'll slow down a bit today, Harry," she murmured into his ear. "Your health is very important to all of us."

Since Harry had nothing more strenuous planned than a little more watching by Honoria's bedside, he nodded readily. "I will, Mrs. Malfoy."

Narcissa kissed the top of his head and stood to seek out the Floo connection she'd used to enter Hogwarts. Harry stood to make his way to the hospital wing.

...must remember that mediwizardry on the Slicing Curse is delicate work. There is typically so much knit skin to be stitched together, and such significant blood loss, that several people are necessary to save a victim's life, unless he or she is brought immediately to the attention of a mediwitch or Lord-level wizard skilled in the healing arts.

Harry scowled over the top of the book at Honoria. "You were damn lucky," he told her. "And I need to learn more about healing magic."

"Harry!"

Before he could even put the book down, Connor engulfed him in a hug. Harry hugged him back, more than a little startled. It was true he hadn't seen his brother so far that day, but it was only noon as yet, and he assumed that Connor would have gone to get news of the battle from someone else if he were already awake. Otherwise, he really would have had a faceful of excited brother some time earlier.

"How did the battle go?" Connor demanded in a low voice. "Is she a casualty?" He glanced sideways at Honoria with a look of undisguised curiosity.

Harry nodded, his heart lightened by Connor's presence. His brother was still a child in important ways, hence Harry's leaving him behind, but he was also alive in an impatient, restless manner that tugged Harry out of himself entirely. "Yes. She took the Slicing Curse for me." Connor shuddered and turned slightly green, no doubt remembering his own experience with that one. "As for how it went, well, the werewolves went in first, the way I told you they would—"

He talked for several minutes, doing what he could to piece together his disjointed impressions and the fact that he had to surmise, not just tell, what some of his allies had been doing, since he didn't know for sure. Connor divided his attention between Honoria and him. His face likewise alternated expressions, awe and shock and envy.

When he got to the part about wishing Greyback out of existence, Harry hesitated, but then plunged on. If he couldn't tell his brother about it, then who, out of the people who hadn't been on the battlefield, could he tell?

"You just wished him gone, and he was?" Connor stared at him, the sunlight through the windows turning his hazel eyes to sparks of shocked fire.

Harry nodded.

"But that's—" Connor shook his head. "Could Voldemort do that?"

"I don't know." Harry stifled a yawn. "Maybe he could, but he prefers to do other things instead. After all, Greyback didn't bleed to death or

leave a surprised-looking corpse, and sometimes those seem to be Voldemort's main criteria for a nasty spell."

"Tell me more!" Connor leaned on Honoria's bed and listened to him.

Harry had just about finished the attack when Honoria took a jolting breath. Harry sat up at once. "Madam Pomfrey!" he called.

The mediwitch came bustling in, took one look at Honoria, and smiled. "There she is," she said. "Her body's magic has joined in fighting the Slicing Curse. She'll live, Mr. Potter."

Harry closed his eyes as a wash of deep, rich gratitude overtook him. "Thank Merlin," he whispered. "Can I let Tybalt Starrise and John Smythe-Blyton know, madam?"

"Only if you tell them to stay at home." Madam Pomfrey shook her head chidingly at him. "She won't be able to have that many visitors for a day or two yet. In fact, now that she's rounded the corner, I'll have to ask you boys to leave."

Harry held up his book as he clambered out of the chair. "And I can borrow this?"

Madam Pomfrey looked at him quite oddly, as if she found his choice of reading material strange, but nodded. Harry stood, stretched, and headed to the Owlery, so that he could send Hedwig with the message. Connor bounced beside him, silent but obviously full of the battle.

"Harry," he said, when they were about halfway up the Owlery steps.

"Hmmm?" Harry was busy thinking about Slicing Curses and shields to counteract them. One thing that made them so dangerous was the expanse of the spell, the invisible blade that sliced a wizard or witch with wide wounds, and could completely evade a narrow Haurio shield not placed just right, or even most Protego ones. Harry thought there ought to be a way around that. Maybe a potion would work better than a shield.

“Do you think I’ll be able to follow you to the next battle?”

Harry turned and leaned against the wall. He should really eat something, he supposed. Lack of food and sleep, the heavy book, and the running around he’d done made him dizzy. But right now, he needed to fix all his concentration on Connor’s face, and give him an honest answer.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “Not yet.”

“I did learn a few new spells with Snape,” Connor protested.

“I know. But not yet.”

“When?”

Harry thought. It wouldn’t be fair to set a marker of his brother besting himself or Snape, or even someone else. Harry didn’t know how well Remus’s skill, for example, compared to the average Death Eater. He was not about to let Connor die just because he could beat Remus but couldn’t beat Karkaroff. There was someone’s word he could trust, though, as long as Harry talked to him about it.

“When Snape says you’re ready.”

Connor’s face fell. “He won’t. He hates me. The way he treated me in our Friday session—“

“How?” Harry snapped, straightening. Damn it, I asked for this thinking they’d be able to work it out. Connor comes around if you treat him fairly, and Snape cares enough for me that I assumed he’d try. “What did he say?”

“Called me a child. Said I wasn’t ready. Took points off Gryffindor for not trying, when I was trying as hard as I could.” Connor clenched his fists and scowled.

Harry adjusted the hold of his left arm around the book and sighed, his anger draining. “Connor, he says things like that all the time in

Potions class, and you can ignore him there. The thing is, he really thinks you aren't trying. He told me that."

"But I am!"

"I know," Harry said soothingly. "I'll speak to him and tell him that, but for right now, you should probably ignore him. If he gets more cutting, then I'll speak to him again. I promise. All right?"

Connor muttered something, then said, "It's just that I love you, Harry, and want to be there for you." He looked up with an unhappy expression that made Harry's heart melt. He tossed the heavy book in the air, let a Levitation Charm catch it, and looped an arm around Connor's shoulders as they walked the rest of the way up to the Owlery.

"I know," he said. "I do know that, Connor." Merlin, how hard it must be to just assume you'd have a role in the war and then get spanked by the near-loss of your brother in your first battle. And I was the one who put him through that pain that I suffered when Honoria was dying. "And I promise that the chance will come soon. But I love you, too, and I want you to be safe. All right?" He put his hand on his brother's shoulder, turning Connor to face him.

Connor nodded, jaw set. Harry hoped he was resolving to work harder and not to annoy Snape.

He called Hedwig down and asked her to carry a message to Tybalt, smiling as she hooted in the affirmative. He borrowed quill and parchment from Connor, since he was so brilliant he'd forgotten to bring them, and scribbled a quick note, including the warning from Madam Pomfrey. Of course, Tybalt had been a Gryffindor, so he probably wouldn't heed it, but Harry had done what he could.

He'd just lifted his arm for Hedwig to fly away when an unfamiliar owl circled down to him. Connor glanced over curiously from the other side of the room, where he was playing with Godric, his black eagle-owl.

"Who's that from?"

Harry shook his head, frowning. The envelope was blank, and the owl took off the moment he freed the message, without waiting for a reply. Harry murmured, "Finite Incantatem," and concentrated hard on the letter, looking for any trace of magic, any charm or glamour that might hide something nasty. In the end, he hovered it in front of his face and tugged it open without using his hand.

The envelope contained a folded piece of parchment and a smaller one. Harry caught the note as it fluttered to the floor, and raised his eyebrows at the writing on it.

Should you wish to reply, simply send an owl with your answer to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. It will reach its destination.

Unsigned, and the hand wasn't familiar. Harry frowned and turned to the letter itself.

He had only to read the first two words before he stopped, his heartbeat sounding in his ears like a slap. He knew that hand, well enough.

"Harry?" Connor was moving towards him now, one hand out. "You've gone pale."

Harry shook his head and used his magic to fold the letter tightly, into a small ball. "From Evan Rosier again," he said dully. "Another useless warning, bragging about how he would have commanded the battle. I don't want to read it right now."

Connor's face softened. "Probably wise."

Harry nodded, and tossed the ball of the letter casually behind him. Another Levitation Charm caught it and slid it into his robe pocket. He managed to carry on the pretense of a normal conversation with Connor, and even go down to lunch with him, though he was aware of the letter all the while, burning like an Ashwinder egg against his hip.

The letter was from James.

Harry had no idea what to do with it.

Chapter Thirty-One: Snape Is a Git

Snape was happily criticizing Hermione Granger's Draught of Peace—it was rare that the know-it-all Gryffindor made a mistake, and he thought it was beneficial for her to hear his opinion when she did—when Harry's cauldron exploded.

Snape whipped around, staring, though his eyes quickly narrowed. The atmosphere around Harry had grown more and more tense this week, building up to a physical and magical attack by several people Harry refused to name as he was coming back to the Slytherin dungeons on Wednesday. Harry had said only that he'd hexed them with results that wouldn't become visible unless they attacked him again. It was the kind of thing that threatened to drive Snape quite mad.

But if someone had made Harry's cauldron explode in the middle of Potions, where Snape could take House points off the perpetrator—

It seemed that no one had, though. Harry stared at the cauldron and wiped at the mixture of hellebore and powdered moonstone that covered him. Snape doubted he would have been so unobservant as not to see whatever trick or mismatched ingredient had dropped into the potion, and where it had come from.

On the other hand, the idea that he had made a mistake was even more inconceivable, considering that Harry had already mastered O.W.L.-standard potions, like this one, with ease.

"Potter!" Snape barked.

Harry looked up at him, still blinking.

"Do you know what mistake you made?" Snape said that even as he looked into Harry's eyes, instinctively using Legilimency as he did so, searching for some sign of a name. Harry looked down and broke the contact of their gaze, but not before Snape had seen intense, gnawing worry, of the kind that he'd had no idea Harry was feeling.

"I stirred in the moonstone in large clumps, sir, and didn't watch them well enough," said Harry quietly. "They stuck together, and then they reacted badly with the syrup. I'm sorry."

Snape frowned. It was the same error Finch-Fletchley had made five minutes ago, resulting in him having to leave the class. At least Harry hadn't taken the blast of the potion full in the eyes. "Clean this up and brew it again," he said, and turned away. He wasn't about to take points from Slytherin, especially when Harry hadn't made a mistake like this before.

The Ravenclaws in the back of the room muttered, but shut up when Snape glared at them. That House was still the most hostile to Harry, and Snape was of the private opinion that the people who had attacked Harry on Wednesday were Ravenclaws—though, of course, he didn't know that for certain, as Harry refused to give them away. Snape had tried to watch for subdued Ravenclaws on Thursday, but everyone was subdued in his classes, so that didn't help.

Now, though, he had a candidate for the mistake. Harry's own worry had probably caused him to focus more on internal matters than the moonstone clumps. Now Snape had only to find out what he was worried about. Harry was coming to talk to him after Connor Potter's dueling session that evening. Snape would be as patient as he could, but he was determined to get the truth out of Harry.

When he can't make Potions, something is seriously wrong. "Come," said Snape, eyeing the door in resignation. The clock said five minutes after eight, and he had entertained the hopeful vision that Potter might not show up that evening. Then he could have the double pleasure of catching up on his marking and giving Harry's brother detention later.

I will take my pleasures where I must, he thought, as the door opened and Potter stepped inside. "You are late," he said. "Five points from Gryffindor."

Potter trembled for a long moment. Snape sneered and watched him. Strange how the son who looked less like the father had come to

represent the hated James Potter more for him. Snape saw the same deficiencies in Harry's brother as in James—the quick enthusiasm at the start of a project that faded when he had to put effort forward, the tendency to sway to others' opinions, the foolish bravery that meant he dreamed more of going into battle than the training necessary to prepare for it or the consequences of what followed after.

Slytherins are more sensible. We think of survival before glory. Snape stood and drew his wand. "No explanation for your lateness, Potter?" he asked.

"I lost track of time," said Potter, and then added, "Sir," as if he had needed to think of the sentence in discrete pieces. Given how slow his thoughts moved, Snape thought that entirely possible.

"I see," said Snape. "Perhaps I should give you a means of keeping track of it, then." He flicked his wand, ignoring Potter's efforts to raise a shield. He was adequate at the Protego, but he hadn't yet learned the anticipation that should let him have it up before his enemy launched the spell it was meant to deflect. "Densaugeo!"

The curse, of course, hit Potter, because when did he ever have a shield up in time? Snape was glad, for the first time, that he was not teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts, though he was sure he would have prepared the students better than Lestrage, who concentrated too intensely on philosophy. He could not have stood to see Potter fail day after day.

He watched clinically as Potter's teeth enlarged, extending almost down to his chin before they stopped growing. "A simple curse, Mr. Potter," he said. "And yet it prevents you from intoning some spells clearly. Your enemy can use it to stop you while he finds a stronger spell that you may be not prepared to counteract. And to insure that you pay attention, you will be left like that until the end of our class or until you manage the countercurse, whichever comes first."

Potter glared at him again, and Snape felt the first hatching tingles of power attacking the air around him. He raised an eyebrow. He had not thought the boy capable of wandless magic at all, and perhaps he was not. This could be the instinctive anger response of any wizard of

this age cornered in an unfair situation, provided he was powerful enough to leak anything beyond his body.

The boy does have potential. But he refuses to exercise it. He wants to argue, to have a sense of fair play, to work through demonstration after demonstration instead of realizing that I am training him for war. Snape clamped his teeth together to keep from saying something about that.

Potter muttered something, carefully keeping his tongue back from his teeth, and a Tripping Jinx formed and flew at Snape. Snape created a Haurio shield without a thought and captured it.

“Stronger spells,” he said. “Unless you are content to make your enemy dance a jig while he tries to slice you open. Confundo!”

Potter promptly staggered, eyes going glassy. Snape felt free to shut his own eyes and give a long, gusty sigh, since he knew that Potter, under the influence of the Confundus Charm, was in no state to notice. Stars above, how in the world am I going to train him? Much fun as mocking and taunting the Gryffindor was, much as he sometimes wanted to hurt him for having grown up with love in the same household where Harry had known nothing but manipulation, he wanted a strategy that worked. Trying to humiliate him didn't inspire Potter to focus his wandless magic. Offering explanations did nothing; Snape had explained over and over in every session the importance of creating a shield at once, and still the boy didn't listen. Insults and belittling, the technique he used in Potions, self-evidently didn't work.

I want to succeed at this, he realized abruptly. Just as I wished to act on emotions rather than my grudge against James Bloody Potter. I want to be able to train Connor Potter for Harry's sake.

Grimacing, sickened at the thought of how sappy that sounded, Snape turned back to Potter. He would not remove the Densaugeo curse, for now; he had said he would leave it on, and he didn't want Potter to think he didn't keep his word. But he lifted the Charm, and Potter blinked in several directions, then blushed hotly.

Snape ignored that. "You see that a spell does not have to be an Unforgivable to confuse the victim," he said. "Many people, when Confounded, will do things that they otherwise will not do. There is a shield that can be worked into the hair around the skull to defeat such mental magic. It is difficult, but I believe you have the raw power to do it." And how that galled his tongue, but it was true. Snape could have been more patient if Potter was weak. He was not, though nowhere near as strong as Harry or Draco or even the Granger girl.

Instead, he was strong, and did nothing.

Snape stopped the path of that thought. Potter was already looking at him as if he had grown a second head. A moment later, he said, voice slightly blurred by his elongated teeth, "But why would you do that? You hate me."

"I am doing it for the sake of the war," said Snape, deciding that Potter did not need the comparison to his brother for right now. See, Harry, I can be careful of the brat's feelings when I try. "I will show you the spell. I know that we can work together, Potter," he added, throwing caution to the winds. "You proved that when you showed me the letter your father had written to you, and said that you wanted me to use that as evidence in charging your parents with the abuse of your brother."

Potter shook his head. "That was about Harry," he said. "This is about me, and I don't think you're really trying to get over your hatred of Gryffindors. At least Harry's in your House."

Snape had never responded well to self-pity in Gryffindor voices, and he did not do it now. "I want competent students to train, Potter," he said. "I know that I am not going to get them in Potions. Most of you are too impatient, too unintelligent to respect the finer points of the art."

Potter had the nerve to roll his eyes at him. "And I suppose that's why you criticize Hermione all the time, too," he said. "Because she only thinks she's smart, and not because she's a Gryffindor."

“She responds to the pushing,” said Snape coldly. “In this class, I know that you can do more than you are doing right now. I insist that you do it. Have a shield raised when you come through the door, you stupid boy. Accept the help of specific spells. Be aware that I will strike at you, and strike again and again, and that my strikes are still more measured than you will encounter in battle. Part of any wizard’s duel, or a meeting between two wizards in the field, is creativity. Some call it by other names, speed or imagination or intelligence. But I have seen quite dim wizards take out stronger and more intelligent ones—“ luckily, he wanted to say, or you would have no chance at all “—because they were better able to anticipate their opponent’s spells, and come up with ones that they had no counter to.”

“Like Quidditch,” said Potter. “And anticipating the dodges of the Snitch.”

Snape beat down the urge to roll his eyes in turn. Whatever analogies the brat needed... “Yes,” he said.

“But I have instincts there,” said Potter. “I don’t know what to do in a duel yet. That’s what you’re supposed to teach me.” He gestured at his long teeth. “Not just curse me and leave me like this.”

Snape laughed, and saw Potter flinch. Well, he’d meant to make him do that. His laughter was not a kind thing. “Death Eaters will leave curses on you that will make this look like a love tap, Potter,” he said. “And they will last days, not hours.”

“That’s why I’m here!” Potter shouted at him, and Snape really had to repress a snort at the way he sounded. “Because I want to know how to resist that. You’re supposed to be teaching me that, too.”

Snape drew in one breath, and then another. When he spoke, his voice was cold and soft, and Potter leaned closer to hear in spite of himself. “I know what I should teach you, Potter. I am perfectly aware of how to survive a war. I fought in the first stage of the one you seem so determined to win. And I will teach you with the methods that I deem to have the best chance of success.”

“Really?” Potter folded his arms. “None of them seem to have worked well so far.”

Snape told himself that Harry would not understand if he Transfigured the stubborn imbecile into a stick of celery and cut him up for use in a Fresh-Breath Potion, no matter how tempting it was. “Stop being afraid of failure, you stupid boy,” he said. “Stop thinking you know everything already. Stop concentrating on your hatred of me, and instead trust that I know what I’m talking about. So long as you have some other goal in mind than mastering this magic, your wandless power remains caged, and your focus is poor.”

Potter perked up. “I could do wandless magic?”

“Perhaps,” said Snape, stressing the word. In truth, he was not sure that the power hovering around Potter’s body indicated the ability to work wandlessly. Sometimes the magic never did manage to narrow down to the single point needed to do even the simplest of spells. Potter might just have raw potential instead, meaning that his curses would be unusually powerful, or a talent like Parseltongue hiding and waiting to be discovered. “But you will never know if you do not trust me and work with me.”

“Can you do wandless magic?”

Snape was not about to entrust a secret like that to a loose-tongued Gryffindor. “I have seen Dumbledore do it,” he said instead. “And Harry.”

Potter’s eyes lowered, but not before Snape had seen the conflicting emotions in them—love, and jealousy, and longing.

Envy his brother, does he? Snape fought the urge to snort. I imagine he has forgotten the details of the abuse. He sees only the end result. Something should happen to remind him shortly.

He saw no point in bringing it up right now, though. He wanted to actually accomplish something with this training session, so that irritation with it would not clog up his mind when he spoke to Harry at nine o’clock. “Shall we continue?” he asked, picking up his wand.

“How did it go?”

Snape kept his back turned to Harry for the moment, while he ordered tea through his fireplace. He could hear Harry settling into the chair on the other side of the room, and then shifting uneasily around for a moment. Harry always did that when they met in his private rooms, as though he were bewildered by the lack of places to hide.

Snape turned around and met his ward's eyes, though he saw nothing as revealing on the surface of his mind as he had seen in Potions. Harry had his Occlumency shields up now, hiding his thoughts. Snape resisted the impulse to snarl. He was the one who had taught Harry to do that, after all. “Your brother is impatient, and wants to join battle already,” he said.

“Yes, I thought of that after Sunday.” Harry leaned back in the chair with a pensive frown. “He sounded as though he wanted to go along to battle without really understanding what it was about. And I thought he would have got some idea, after he went with us to the beach.”

“And did absolutely nothing,” Snape pointed out, taking his own seat on the couch. A house elf appeared a moment later with two cups of tea, one of which Snape accepted with a grateful sigh. Harry shook his head when the elf tried to offer him the other one. Snape frowned, but let it pass. Harry was in one of his vates moods, that was obvious.

“Maybe that's it, then,” Harry said. “Maybe he wants to prove himself, not just get glory. Connor's always more stubborn about making up for a past failure than about making a new stride.” Snape listened in silence to the fondness in his voice. He had to wonder if Harry would have cared about Connor at all without the forced affection from his training. They were simply too different, and Harry spent most of a conversation about him forgiving or excusing his brother's faults. “How is he progressing?”

“Not well,” Snape said. “He wants to do more than he is currently able to. He accuses me of being unfair. He thinks he knows better about what I should teach than I do.”

“And you’re never unfair?” Harry asked that in a wry tone, but his gaze was anxious. Snape knew Harry would accept what he said, and so he answered with the truth.

“I very often heap insults on his House in my mind, but only in my mind. The worst I have ever called him is a stupid boy.”

“Professor—”

“You came to me for help in training your brother, Harry,” Snape broke in. “That does not mean I can change my nature.”

Harry sighed. “I know. Just—I think I should speak to him. I assure you he is trying, but he probably doesn’t think the same thing about you. May I mention some of the knowledge you have to him, so that he knows you’re definitely the best candidate for teaching him?”

“Do not mention that I can do wandless magic when I am angry. That is a weapon I prefer to keep to myself.”

Harry nodded. “I won’t.” His hand moved down to pat a pocket of his robe in what looked like a habitual nervous gesture. Snape’s eyes narrowed. If that is a nervous habit, it is a newly-acquired one.

Harry drew his hand back in the next moment, and said, “I suppose we should work on blocking the scar connection. I’m still getting flashes of dreams from Voldemort—nothing definite now, but for all I know, he could overpower my mind whenever he wants. And he’s getting stronger again.” His face reflected grim resignation for just a moment, and then that dropped away and he simply looked anxious. “What do you suggest I envision for a shield, Professor?”

“Something light and flexible,” Snape murmured, staring at Harry’s robe pocket as if that could make the cloth transparent. A small object; it didn’t make the pocket appear unnatural. “Perhaps the quicksilver of an Occlumency pool will be best.”

“Grass?”

Snape brought his eyes back to Harry's. "Why that?"

Harry hesitated too long, and then said, with too much force and brightness, "We flew over long grass when we brought the brooms down near Woodhouse. I keep remembering the way it swayed in the wind, but hid the werewolves crouching in it. I want a barrier that can move, but will conceal what's on the other side of the scar connection from Voldemort."

Reluctantly, Snape nodded. He wondered if the association with grass—or the memory of the werewolves springing?—was what troubled Harry, but he would not yet ask. It was absolutely imperative that Harry block the scar connection first. Then, if that relaxed him enough, Snape would try to get him to talk about whatever was bothering him.

"Legilimens," he murmured, eyes locked on Harry's, and then he slid forward and into the welcoming darkness of air around a steel skeleton covered with the thick, bushy leaves of emotions.

Harry showed him the scar connection, a twisting void between two of the metallic branches, communicating the dimensions of the tunnel and how hard it was to block without words. Snape answered in the same way, showing, rather than explaining, how to weave a thin, flexible barrier across the opening. It was similar to an Occlumency pool, but Harry could retrieve his emotions from those at a moment's notice. This had to be a little less responsive to the Occlumens's will, so as not to open and expose the thing it barricaded during normal dreaming. Now that Snape thought about it, a visualization of grass would work very well. It moved with the wind, but it took a lot of wind, or the work of digging hands, to uproot it.

Harry spun soil into being, and lowered the long blades gently into place, spanning the whole of that starless pit that bound him to the Dark Lord. Then the skeleton shifted a bit, reaching out and grasping the sides of the hole so as to provide a resting place for the grass. Snape nodded. It was a good practice, one of the reasons that wizards' minds were so often of a piece, like a single house or forest, rather than a hodgepodge of unconnected pieces; if the barrier

looked too unnatural, it would be harder for Harry to imagine and maintain.

Snape floated backward, withdrawing from Harry's mind, and then caught another glimpse of that dark worry again, thrusting through the Occlumency pool that had tried to contain it like reeds through shallow water.

He hesitated, then reached out and explored the edges of it. He would not try to learn specific details, like the names of the students who had attacked Harry, he promised himself sternly. But if more than one problem troubled his ward, then he should know about it.

All the worry focused on one thing, though. The moment Snape let his own awareness brush the edge of that volatile emotion, he knew what it was.

He snapped open his eyes and held out a hand, his rage acting to fuel his wandless magic, even as Harry desperately clapped his fingers over his robe pocket. "Accio letter!" Snape snapped, and the little ball of paper rolled out of an uncompressed corner and soared across the room into Snape's palm.

"Stop it!" Harry shouted, leaping to his feet. Uncontrolled rage blazed in his eyes, and a wind whipped the fire hard enough that it went out, leaving only the torches to illuminate the room. "You have no right to read that, no right—"

Snape ignored him. Until and unless Harry actually attacked him with magic—and having seen how well Harry had restrained himself after the arrests of his parents and Dumbledore, he really had no fear of that—he did not need to defend himself. Instead, he unrolled the letter from James Bloody Potter and read it.

October 6th, 1995

Dear Harry:

I know that you won't want to hear from me. But I have something very important to tell you. I can only hope that you read this letter through to the end, because of how much it matters to me.

I've learned a little information about the trial; they tell us if we ask, and sometimes legal books on child abuse are among the ones that appear on the shelves in my cell. And I've learned that sometimes it's possible for the accused to be tried on partial charges. That means that some of the charges against me could be dropped, even though not all of them would be. I wouldn't ask you to try to get all of them removed, but there are thirteen charges of neglect against me. Even dropping six or seven could mean the difference between death or the stripping of my magic, and simple imprisonment.

Could you try, Harry, please? For me? I know that I haven't done right by you in the past. I'm very sorry for that, and I'd like to try anew. If I went to Tullianum for five or ten years, then we could talk, and as long as I still had my magic when I got out, we could try to lead a somewhat normal life. I have messed up my second chances before, but I swear, I swear to you in the name of Merlin, this time I won't. But the thought of dying or losing my magic weighs on my mind every day. I can't do much but sit here and shiver. It was an effort to write this letter. As long as I knew that I would live, and get out of prison someday, then I could make plans for that future, and be happier and healthier and more productive.

Please, Harry. Try. For the sake of the family we could be together someday.

Your loving father,

James.

Snape realized his hands were shaking as he finished the letter. There was no danger of some sappy emotion being the reason they shook, of course. He was in that dreamland beyond fury, where his anger expanded beyond his body and rattled items on the shelves. When he had entered this mood as a Death Eater, then he killed, efficiently and painfully and with a bloody, wild joy. The tension building up within him now could be released only by death.

"You had no right to read that."

Snape came back to himself long enough to notice that Harry had taken his seat again and sat with his head hanging. His voice was dull and resigned, and he flinched when Snape stood, the concern he bore somewhat counteracting the urge to cause pain and draw blood.

"You hadn't read it yourself," Snape said. "Why?"

"Because I knew I would have had to write back," said Harry, jerking his head up and snarling at him, the resignation vanished. Fury lit his eyes a complex green, and his lightning bolt scar flared on his forehead, as though they hadn't blocked its connection after all. "And I promised Mrs. Malfoy that I wouldn't communicate with my parents."

Snape felt a distant surprise that Harry had managed to keep that promise. The letter rang in his head, though, and he had to bite out the next words. "And why didn't you come to anyone and tell them about this letter? Draco? Me? Your brother, for Merlin's sake?"

"Because I knew this would happen, damn you!" Harry stood. "I knew you would get angry! And some of it would be at me, and some of it would be at James, and either way results in someone getting hurt, and I'm so angry at him for writing!"

Snape jerked himself to a stop. This was the first thing he could remember Harry voluntarily confessing about his feelings for his parents, other than his insistent desire to forgive them. Snape breathed slowly, even as he kept his voice cool. "And you could not have put the letter in a drawer? Someplace it would be safe?"

"I always wanted it with me." Harry ran his hand through his hair and paced back and forth. "I was afraid someone would find it if I left it behind. But I hated that, too. It feels like he's a chain around my neck, always with me. Why can't he leave me alone?" Those last words sounded as if he'd scraped his throat raw in saying them.

“He can, Harry,” Snape said softly, treading as carefully as he could. “He will. When Scrimgeour learns that the letter somehow got out of James’s hands when he was already in custody—“

And Harry swung towards him, and Snape knew he had pushed too far. The glimpse into Harry’s emotions vanished as he sealed the crack that had produced it. He glared, and the letter soared from Snape’s hand to his without a word spoken. Then Harry bowed his head and read it. Snape did not quite dare to interrupt him.

“Typical,” said Harry when he finished, with utterly no emotion in his words. He rolled the letter up again and put it back in his pocket.

“Harry—“ Snape began.

“No, I’m not going to try and get the charges dropped,” said Harry. His voice was wooden. “And I promise that I won’t send a letter back. I promise to you, as well as Mrs. Malfoy, that I won’t do it.” He made for the door.

“I am not as concerned about that as I am about your mental health,” Snape said to his back. Since he knows what I’m after already, I might as well bare all my motives. “When you begin making mistakes in Potions, Harry, then something is badly wrong.”

Harry swung around. “I won’t do that anymore,” he said, with the force of a vow. “I’m sorry for doing it today.” Snape nearly flinched, knowing Harry meant he was sorry for providing any hint of his emotions at all, rather than as an apology for disrupting class. “It’s fine now.”

“It is not,” said Snape forcefully. “This is why I wanted you to speak to someone, Harry. I am willing to fetch anyone you wish, except one of your parents or Dumbledore. Regulus would—“

“Fetch who you want,” said Harry, locking himself down behind the calm mask that Snape remembered from his first year at Hogwarts, and had always hated. “I’m not talking about it.”

“Why?” Snape asked.

"It's mine to keep," said Harry. "I told you that. Everyone knows what happened. That's fine." The choke in his voice immediately afterwards revealed how much he still hated it. "But they're not going to know how I feel about what happened. That's mine."

Snape could think of nothing to say. He had never been good at this part of comforting. When Harry had been more unconscious of his own reactions, he thought as he watched his ward leave the room, even insistent that he hadn't been abused, things were actually easier. That meant he exposed all sorts of telltale signs with a careless word that to him meant something else, or a flash in the eyes that he didn't know he was giving out, or his simple expectation that someone else would agree with his twisted notions of love, sacrifice, and forgiveness.

Now, though, Harry knew how other people saw him, and he had partially healed, and he knew the cost of that healing. Now, he was jealously guarding his secrets, and Snape didn't know how to get through the walls. Manipulation and lying were distasteful to him where Harry was concerned—he had gone as far as he ever wished to in that direction with his lies of omission about possessing Dumbledore's memories and what he intended to do with them—but he knew of no direct assault that would work.

He sat down and stared into the cold hearth.

Must I hurt him again, if that is the only way to get him the help he needs?

How dare he?

Harry was halfway back to the Slytherin common room before that thought, or a variation of it, stopped running through his head. He halted, leaning his brow on the cool stone, and breathed carefully. Wet scents came and curled through his nostrils. Harry forced himself to think about them, about what would happen if water came flooding

through the dungeons—would anyone even notice the difference in scent in time to escape the torrent?—and finally, gradually, relaxed.

Then he went about the more difficult process of reconciling himself with what had happened.

He saw it. It was probably inevitable that he would the moment I invited him into my head to firm up the Occlumency barrier. And I was slipping more than I thought, if I let my worry affect my behavior in Potions. Harry sighed. He'd fobbed Draco off with the idea that he'd slipped in Potions because of a flash of a vision from Voldemort, and told him that he was going to Snape tonight to block the scar connection—which did happen to be true. He felt bad about lying.

But the fiery panic that he felt at the mere thought of sharing any of his true and churning emotions overruled even his scruples there. He would tell Draco anything else, including his worries about how well Snape and Connor were getting along in their extra dueling lessons. This was the one thing no one else could have, though, the one thing no one else would ever have.

Snape keeps urging me to be a little more selfish. You'd think he'd be pleased.

Harry gave a rusty chuckle at that, and smoothed the ground where he'd buried his feelings one more time. So. Someone knew about the letter from James now, and he didn't have to worry about keeping that secret. He'd be all right. He would. He would still ignore the temptation to write back. Anchoring the promise to Snape, who was here with him in Hogwarts, would help with that.

But he would not ignore the temptation to hope. James had learned, it seemed. He no longer spoke of being set free entirely. He just didn't want to pay an unfair price for his crimes. He wanted to make sure that he still had a future when he got out of Tullianum, so that he could dedicate his life to his sons.

Harry let his stiff shoulders fall back into position, and sighed. He had changed his mind about going to the Slytherin common room, though. He wanted to fly. Granted, it was after nine at night and he wasn't

supposed to be outside the walls after dark, but he wouldn't go beyond the wards. This would help clear his head and make him an easier person for Draco and the others to be around tonight.

He slipped easily through the halls, wrapped in a Disillusionment Charm, and Accio'd his Firebolt once he had reached the Quidditch Pitch. When it came to him, he climbed onto it and kicked off, rising swiftly into the night. He shivered as the high cold burned through him. He hadn't brought Quidditch gear or a glove, of course.

But that was all right. He wouldn't stay out long. He lay down along the broom, stabilizing himself to compensate for the loss of his hand, and turned his face up to watch the waning moon. The Firebolt flew in lazy circles.

He kept his mind on physical sensations, on the cold and the sounds, both odd and natural, that drifted up from the Forbidden Forest. His breath plumed in front of his face, and Harry watched the clouds of steam as long as he could, until the darkness insisted on breaking them up. The moon hunched like a crabbed old man, and Harry counted the craters he could see on his face. He almost remembered a fey tale he'd learned as a child, about Merlin and the battle he'd fought with the man in the moon, but he refused to remember it. That would drag up memories of Lily and James and—the other things.

He was yawning and thinking he should go down when he saw a small shape circle through a beam of moonlight. Harry blinked and sat up. Had someone come after him? Draco was the only one likely to, and he would have called out before he reached that height.

The other flyer sped past him again, and this time Harry could see that it was far too small to be a wizard on a broom. In fact, it had visible wings, and was about the size of a phoenix. He hovered, watching in interest as it drew nearer and nearer. Was this a species of magical creature, perhaps, come to ask him a question as vates?

The creature finally came close enough, and seemed determined enough, that Harry thought he could risk calling a ball of light into his palm without frightening it. The moment the golden glow winked into

being above his hand, the creature altered its path and came straight for him.

Harry recoiled. This close, he could see that the creature was unnatural. It did look like a bird, but its beak had teeth, and each feathered wing, twisting with iridescent colors like the shades spilled on a patch of oil, bore a crown of three claws. Its feet folded close to its breast, powerful, clawed things bigger than most raptors' talons Harry had seen. Its long tail was a lizard's.

But it was the aura around it that really made it ugly. Harry could feel its magic spreading out beyond its body, invisible but very present. That magic was a vicious, violent thing, seeking to rend and kill.

He swerved. The bird swerved with him, impossibly fast, and lashed out as it soared just above his head, setting Harry coughing with the foul musk from its feathers. The claws scored five ragged lines down his left cheek.

I like/hate you, snarled a voice that resembled a Dementor's as much as it resembled anything, drilling like a spike of cold into Harry's head. I love/loathe you.

"What are you?" Harry insisted, no longer doubting it was intelligent. He shivered as the blood stopped flowing from the cuts almost at once; they were freezing shut. He whirled back upright, and saw the bird turn in the night to face him, using its tail for balance. Its eyes were red. It laughed at him.

Guess, it said, and then it flew straight up into the sky and vanished in the darkness and moonlight. Harry scanned for it, flying into the space where it had been, but found nothing. It might have been a purely magical creation.

Harry shivered, and gingerly touched his face, wincing when his fingers encountered icy scabs. He supposed he should go see Madam Pomfrey, and then would come the multiple explanations.

He sighed, and circled back down towards the school. At least it's reminded me that there's a world beyond myself again. I can be grateful for that.

Chapter Thirty-Two: Spells That Leave No Mark

Lucius gave a long, luxurious stretch—rather, he thought, like a cat prepared to go hunting. Well, he did not resent the comparison. Cats were noisy and foul-scented enough that he would never tolerate one in the Manor for long—Draco’s Kneazle kitten when he was a child had been enough of a burden—but in the abstract, he could accept the idea of grace, and speed, and beauty.

And deadliness to mice.

He checked his preparations carefully one more time. He had the cage of insects. He had the knowledge of curses burning in his head and on his tongue. He had the blank wand. He had the requisite amount of trust in Auror Wilmot to make sure that things went as planned.

He finished the check, and blinked lazily.

Time to go a-hunting.
“Welcome, Mr. Malfoy.”

Lucius smiled into Wilmot’s eyes as he held out his hand for a shake. The pale, hazel-eyed man clasped it with no sign of hesitation, and ignored the small flinch Lucius wanted him to feel at his touching a halfblood. He simply shook, and then moved back to his desk and shuffled through some papers.

“As you know, Mr. Malfoy, the new laws that may make an impact on the activities of Dark families are really quite simple to follow—“

Lucius listened, and smiled and nodded in all the right places to convince someone passing by that this really was all he had come for. The cage of insects sat at his side, glamoured to look like a bag of papers. The blank wand lay in his pocket. He thought more about them than information he had already received from his own contacts in the Ministry long before the laws reached this stage.

Wilmot continued talking, producing more sheaves of paper and shuffling through them with droning enthusiasm. Most of the people who walked past looked at Lucius with pity for being caught up in the Auror's talk. Lucius managed to ignore those glances easily. In fact, he wanted to laugh. Wilmot was a near-perfect actor, and if anyone suspected what Lucius was really here for, he would eat his own hand.

Abruptly, he realized that Wilmot's voice continued, even though the man had stood and reached for his wand. Lucius arched an eyebrow, and raised it higher when he realized that a complicated illusion was in place that maintained images of both himself and Wilmot in their chairs, nodding and chattering respectively. He stood, carefully scanning his own copy. It looked no different than the one he saw in the mirror every day, save for a certain blankness behind the eyes.

"Triggered spell," Wilmot explained, when he saw Lucius looking at him. "It needed a certain amount of time to pass before it could take our likenesses." He waved his wand and murmured a simple glamour spell under his breath, one, Lucius knew, that would not trigger the Ministry's wards into thinking a prisoner was escaping as a Disillusionment Charm would. In moments, Wilmot's features melted and changed into those of a drab Ministry flunky Lucius wouldn't have looked twice at, and from the tingle in his own cheeks, he suspected the same thing had happened to him.

"This way," Wilmot said softly, and walked towards the lifts.

Lucius followed, inwardly exulting in the effectiveness of Aurelius Flint's spy network. Whatever debt Wilmot owed to Nott, it must have been enormous, to make him take so many risks in smuggling Lucius in to torture the Potters.

There was, of course, the chance that Wilmot would betray him later, but Lucius doubted that. Others in the Ministry owed debts that could, with a bit of pressure, be transferred to Lucius. Those others would keep an eye on Wilmot for him.

As they rode the lifts down, Wilmot murmured, "You trusted me to make arrangements to insure you would not be caught. They are

done, Mr. Malfoy. And I think you will be pleased with the one who takes your fall.”

Lucius gazed into his face, finding it hard to estimate, as always, what the real emotions were like under the glamour. “Who is it?”

Wilmot told him.

Lucius gave a little chuckle. Sometimes, he enjoyed being surprised. This surprise was a pleasant one, given what inconvenience the person was currently causing him. And Wilmot was right in the explanations he gave for his choice. Everyone would believe that this person would torture the Potters.

I could become fond of Wilmot. An intelligent friend in the Ministry, one who managed to survive Scrimgeour’s first purge of the Aurors, is a useful thing to have.

“Here we are.”

Lucius raised his eyebrows when he realized there were no guards on the cells. He had assumed that Wilmot would arrange to have the usual guards bribed or drugged or otherwise out of the way, but no one appeared to have been here for at least five minutes. Wilmot smiled at him, a mysterious smile that said he valued his own secrets, and cast the spells that unlocked James Potter’s door and took the glamour from Lucius’s face.

Lucius lifted the cage with the insects and stepped within. Behind him, the door shut and locked again. Lucius was unconcerned. He knew spells that would make Wilmot regret leaving him in here if he tried it, and Wilmot knew he knew them. It was always so pleasant to understand one’s associates. In fact, Lucius was more than usually pleased with the world today. He did hope that wouldn’t affect the way that he planned to torture James Potter. He would hate to think he was being kind.

The cell was too large for someone who had committed Potter’s crimes, and too soft. James lay curled on the bed in one corner, his shoulder hunched. He tensed a bit when he heard the door open, but

didn't turn to see who it was. Lucius had no impression so strong as that of a sulky child, trying to convey the impression of stern strength in ignoring intruders. In reality, of course, the impression James conveyed was of a pouting lip.

Lucius set the cage on the floor and removed the glamour. Then he said, "Hello, Potter."

James sat up and whirled around. The ghost-like pallor to his face told Lucius that he'd recognized his visitor. He had to swallow several times before he could say anything, though. Lucius watched the performance all the way through, finding it immensely entertaining. He wondered if James often demanded water from the guards, whether he had to work up to all his speeches the way he was working up to this one, and whether he would say anything worthwhile when he did finally speak.

It was not so much a surprise as a disappointment when he didn't. "I'm not afraid of you, Malfoy," he tried.

"Of course you're not." Lucius pulled the blank wand from his pocket. It came to life in his hands with a soft thrum. This was part of the task it had been made for, and it would perform the spells required of it for that task, then go dead. Thus Lucius avoided any suspicion of using his own wand, which he'd been required to register when he entered the Ministry. "That's why you're shaking, Potter. It happens to be cold, with a high wind, in here. Why not fool yourself, since you have been doing so for so long?"

James all but vibrated, leaning forward and just catching himself as he was about to tumble off the bed. "You can't do anything to me, Malfoy. Do you realize what would happen if Harry found out? If Scrimgeour found out?"

"Yes," said Lucius. "Probably better than you do, since I know both your son and the Minister, while you have hidden behind your own ignorance for more than a decade." He touched the cage with the blank wand. The bars went transparent, though they didn't open as yet. The insects inside began flinging themselves madly against the

front. Lucius wondered how long it would take for James to notice them. “That is why they are not going to find out.”

James gave a long, liquid snort. “You can’t possibly disguise whatever you intend to do, Malfoy.”

“Yes, I can,” said Lucius softly.

James went on, undaunted. Or perhaps he thought that if he ignored what Lucius said, the problem would go away. That was his *modus operandi*, from what Lucius understood of him. “I’ve just written a letter to Harry. He knows me better than you do. He understands the good in people. He’ll come save me. You shouldn’t be here when he comes, if you know what’s good for you, and he could show up at any moment.”

Lucius’s amusement froze, and then cracked and fell away. He didn’t change his expression, of course. He did not wish to do so. The news that James Potter had written their Potter filled him with rage like dry ice, and then pleasure as cold as the amusement had turned.

“James Potter,” he said, “abuser of children, coward, imbecile, disgrace to the name of pureblood wizard, this will be a positive pleasure.” He tapped the front of the cage with the blank wand, and murmured the incantation that released the insects, stepping out of the way as he did so.

A deep buzz filled the room as the insects soared free, a whirling swarm like that of mosquitoes, though much bigger. They swirled twice, wavered as if they would head for Lucius—though he wore a repelling charm already—and then oriented on James.

“No,” said James, though he couldn’t possibly know what they were.

Lucius didn’t bother to respond. He savored the shocked and horrified look on James’s face just before the starving insects dove at him.

Hundreds of small crooked legs bearing barbed pincers on the end hooked into James’s flesh. He screamed as the long beaks lowered and hooked in after them, but Lucius knew no one would hear him;

the cells bore Silencing Charms to prevent the prisoners from annoying each other. Lucius stepped slightly to the side, to get a better view, as James half-vanished under the black cloud, all the while screaming in horror and pain.

Then the insects began to shrink. Lucius closed his eyes to savor the way James's cries lifted, soaring. The pain did not vanish when the insects dug in, of course. It became keener, from hundreds of pinpricks to hundreds of red-hot irons, all focused on an inch of skin or less.

When he looked again, Lucius had the treat of seeing the insects pass into James's body. They slipped through pores, they turned into smoke and wafted in through his eyes and nostrils, they kicked into his armpits and burrowed in. The holes they created vanished as they went inside. The pain would stay there, but there was no sign of bites or stings. Strictly speaking, what the insects had fastened on was James's magical self, and not his physical one.

James stopped screaming and stared at his unmarked arms in bewilderment. Lucius leaned on the wall, smiling. He wasn't surprised when James raised his eyes to him and snapped, "What the fuck did you do to me? What was the point of that?"

"You have no idea," Lucius said pleasantly. "And it will stay that way."

In truth, the insects were coursing through James's bloodstream now, blending with his tissues, becoming part of his body in the way that his bones were. They would search out some sign of Dark magic. That was how the healers of the past had used them, to eat curses that no ordinary mediwizardry could take care of. Most victims suffered no pain when the insects dug in, since the curses offered them food, and the healers would remove the bugs the moment their task was completed.

James had no Dark curses on him. The insects had to burrow into his magic instead. They would search every corner of him, but when they found none of the food they preferred, they would make their own. James had just become home to a thriving colony of insects whose

presence would go entirely unnoticed and unremarked for a year, perhaps two.

Then the disturbance in his body would manifest as cancer. Lucius rather suspected that it would appear full-blown in every part of his body cancer could appear in, that he would experience horrible pain, that he would know he was going to die for several months on end—intolerable to a coward like him. The Healers would shake their heads, but they would not be able to tell the difference between a natural and magical cancer. By then, there would be no trace of the insects to be found. And why should anyone suspect or look for them, when it was entirely uncommon for the insects to be used in medical practice anymore?

James Potter would die now. Lucius rather hoped the Wizengamot would leave him alive, and condemn him to Tullianum. A few short, miserable years, and then death inevitable and undeniable. If the Ministry cut that short with one of their painless executions, Lucius would be annoyed.

At least he had the anticipation to savor, and the belief that the Wizengamot would not hand down a death sentence. James had only been charged with neglect. They were less likely to think that that crime deserved one.

James said, “Of course I’m going to tell Harry about this. I don’t know what you did, but he will. How in the world do you think you’re going to get away with this, Lucius?”

“I didn’t give you permission to call me by my first name, Mr. Potter,” said Lucius. “And I prefer getting away with it to having you know what I have done. Don’t worry, you’ll have plenty of unpleasant anticipation of pain in the future.” As James opened his mouth, frowning, Lucius aimed the blank wand at him and added, in a casual voice, “Obliviate.”

James’s face went slack, and he blinked. Lucius said softly, “You’ve been asleep. You had a painful dream, but that’s nothing unusual for a man accused as unfairly as you’ve been, is it? I think you should go

to sleep, James, and not quite remember what the dream is about. It would be best.”

James dropped to the bed, limp as a doll, and rolled over. Lucius stepped backwards and tapped on the door in the prearranged pattern that let Wilmot know it was time to let him out. The cage floated behind him as he stepped into the hall, and Wilmot reset the locking spells, all the while darting curious glances at Lucius.

“He’ll suffer,” was all that Lucius thought it necessary to say in response to that glance.

Wilmot nodded, and then let him towards Lily Potter’s cell. Lucius felt pleasure stretch in him like a cat in the sun, and smiled as the first curse twitched behind his lips.

She did more. She will suffer more. And no one will suspect me. This has all the ingredients of a wonderful afternoon.

Lily sighed. She knew this was a dream, because of the softness of the ground beneath her feet and the incredible, surreal richness of the sky over her head, but that didn’t stop her from wishing it were true.

In the dream, she stood on the lawn outside their old home, the house at Godric’s Hollow, and watched Connor play. He was skipping a stone across the pond, cheering as it went further and further with each try, and laughing as the chips of mica in the stone bounced the sun back. It was such an innocent game. No one was hurt. Lily could not help thinking that Connor was inherently better than other children, but surely it helped that he had been reared in such peaceful surroundings, not taught violence. It was love that would defeat Voldemort, and Connor knew love.

Harry stood beside her, watching his brother in silence. Lily turned and gazed down at him. He was taller than this now, she knew, but then, Connor was a child, so Harry could be a child—in body. He had never been a child in mind, not since she started training him and he started understanding the importance of his task. He turned his head up and looked at her, and contentment shone in his eyes. He knew

the real importance of the prophecy. Yes, he had been the one who deflected the Killing Curse and destroyed Voldemort, but the heart, the core, the thing that would win the war, was love. So even though he knew the truth now, he was still content to yield place and precedence to his brother. He could remain in the background because he was ultimately less loving than Connor.

Lily ruffled Harry's hair, and listened to Connor's laughter, and fought against the remembrance that things had ever been different. She would have to wake up sometime, but why, oh why, did it have to be now? All the world was wonderful again. She had been right. Her sacrifices were acknowledged and agreed with. There was no son turning against her, no strange and savage knowledge that she might have been wrong staring her in the face, no one telling her that she had abused her children when she had simply done what she could to prepare them for war. She liked this dream.

"Mum?"

Lily smiled down at Connor. He hadn't spoken in that particular needy tone in years, since he had decided that he was a big boy and could take care of himself. "Yes, Connor?"

"I have something to show you." He held out the flat stone he'd been skipping, so that Lily could admire the way those same flecks of mica that had flashed the sun back were shifting and changing. "See! Do you think it's accidental magic, or something else?"

"Let me see." Lily bent down to look, adoring the warmth of the light on her face and the sweet scent of her son and Harry's silent presence at her back. This was life, the life they all should have had. This was reality.

Connor smashed the stone into the side of her head.

The shattering of her dream was almost worse than the intense pain that flooded her. Lily felt herself drop, and then she lay on the warm grass, staring up at Connor. Behind her, she heard Harry laugh, as he never did. The laugh was mocking, and Connor smiled the same way as he stood over her, bouncing the bloodied stone in his palm.

“Why?” Lily managed to whisper, and then she coughed on blood that shouldn’t be there, not when all she’d taken was a blow to the side of the head.

“Because I hate you,” said Connor, his smile gone and his eyes suddenly narrow with dislike. Lily felt her heart break. Connor’s eyes were hazel, just like James’s, and looking into them now was like having James hate her, the way he might if he knew about Harry’s training. “You didn’t prepare me for war. You kept me innocent all along. And now I’m so far behind, and struggling to catch up, and Merlin, I just hate you!” He gave a loud sob, and then knelt beside her and smashed the stone down again.

Lily couldn’t move. Dimly she felt more and more smacks, the shattering of her skull and the spattering of her brains, but the keener sensation was Harry’s laugh, which she heard for all but the very few moments before death claimed her.

Lily awoke and sat up with a gasp. She was in her bed in the cell at the Ministry, and for the first time ever, she was grateful to be there. She shivered, gripping her arms and bowing her head.

“Potter?”

Lily looked up swiftly, then relaxed. An Auror had entered, but this was one of the guards who had always been kind to her, slipping her extra food on the sly and never making fun of her for not being able to use magic, the way some of the others did. Her name was Elizabeth, and now she regarded Lily with wonder and unease in her brown eyes, slowly lowering her wand.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“A horrible dream,” Lily whispered. She said it with such emotion in her voice, emotion she hadn’t even known herself capable of, that Elizabeth tucked her wand away altogether and came to sit down beside Lily, smoothing her sweat-soaked hair off her forehead.

“It’s all right,” Elizabeth whispered. “That takes people, sometimes, near the trials. And of course you’ve been having more than your fair share of nightmares.” Lily took comfort in her anger. It wasn’t right that nightmares from a curse had tortured her, was it? And after all she had given up for the war. It was no more right than the fact that neither of her sons ever visited her, than the twisted idea Harry had that she’d abused him because she wanted to. She hadn’t wanted to. It was a choice between sacrificing him and letting the world fall into darkness. It was only due to the training he’d had that he could face Voldemort at all. And she would have done everything differently, anyway, if she’d known at the time that Harry was the one who had deflected the Killing Curse. He would have had training because of his powerful magic, but she would never have thought of him as a potential Dark Lord.

A dull axe cut into the back of her neck.

Lily gasped and tried to stand, but Elizabeth’s arm curved around her, keeping her right where she was. Lily stared into the Auror’s pleasant face and smiling eyes, and then suddenly realized it was a mask, a glamour. Someone else was under the glamour—Auror Mallory, who had arrested her and made her life a living hell when she first arrived here. Lily screamed.

Mallory laughed, and held her still as the axe rose and then cut down again. It took a long time. A human neck was thick, and when an executioner wasn’t committed to doing his task properly, it might take as many as fifteen cuts to slice through all that flesh and bone and muscle...

Lily counted twenty-two cuts before death came for her, as a mercy. Lucius fought to still his twitching lips as he stood in a corner of Lily Potter’s cell and watched her experience her visions. The Neco Identidem curse linked his mind to hers, and let him see, if he chose to, exactly what she was feeling and thinking as the spell went into operation. Currently, she had died five times, and she was starting to notice and suspect and dread the death the moment she awoke in another dream. Lucius had to admit he was a bit impressed at her creativity, though by far the most rewarding part of this whole curse was her fear as she perished. That really was what dying was like.

Lucius admired his own creativity, too. Even if the Wizengamot sentenced Lily Potter to execution, as Lucius thought would most likely happen, she could only die once. That was not enough to pay for her crimes.

And then an idea occurred to him. A delicious idea. An idea he knew he could put into motion, though it would mean giving up the repetitions of the Neco Identidem curse and the other mental assaults he'd planned. Lucius straightened and stared at Lily Potter.

There was also the chance, the smallest and most infinitesimal chance, that an Auror experienced in Dark Arts would sense the spell, and Auror Wilmot's fall wizard was not someone who would use this particular curse. It could lead to Lucius getting caught.

He was a Slytherin. He weighed the risk of being caught in his head against the smallness of it, and the pleasure it would give him to enact this revenge, and the binding that his family had to Harry Potter. Then he nodded.

He would roll the dice.

He raised the Neco Identidem curse, and Lily Potter whimpered and slid into true sleep. Lucius smiled, distantly, even as he began to move in precise, controlled gestures. She might as well remain asleep for this portion of the invocation. Lucius was not about to tell her its purpose, anyway.

He extended the blank wand above his head, and whispered, "Lamnae cruore adoleo."

The air trembled in front of him, and the knife-blade formed, gleaming, near his left arm. That meant Lucius was ready for the sacrifice he had just promised to make. If he had not been sincere, the knife would never have formed at all.

He turned his arm sideways, and the skin split. Lucius felt fire trace its way up his veins. He didn't flinch. Cold followed it. He might have been a statue. The knife filled the cut with spiky, jagged pain, and still Lucius did not move, staring at the blade, the knowledge of what he

would accomplish with this spell, this ritual, this sacrifice, obviating any response to the agony.

At last, he bled. The knife turned, catching the blood on its blade. Then it hovered, still, in place. Lucius would have to enact the second part of the spell himself. Everything about this ritual was a choice, with multiple chances to turn back. The wizards who had created this particular branch of Dark Arts had wanted to insure that only the strongest reached the end and achieved the desired results.

“Concedo adflictationem me,” he murmured.

Then he had to close his eyes and stand still as his entire body tingled and went numb. All sensation ended. He could no longer feel the pain from the cut, the blood trickling on his skin, the knife pressed against the wound, his heartbeat against his chest. If he moved, if he panicked, the spell would break. He had to wait as the knife drew his own pain into it. When he opened his eyes, at last, and a tendril of sensation began to return, the knife glowed a brilliant yellow, pregnant with pain.

“Adflictationem indigeo annalis,” he said.

The knife trembled. Lucius felt brief, whip-like spikes of magic brush past his head. The summoned power might decide to obey him, and it might not. In that moment, his dedication to the Dark was measured, and his commitment to his revenge, and his motive for seeking that revenge. No one but a Dark wizard desiring vengeance could cast this spell. Lucius stood in silence and endured the inspection. He was confident that he would pass muster.

The knife turned and flew to Lily Potter, scoring a shallow cut on the back of her neck. The yellow light flowed from the blade into the wound. Again she whimpered, and again she failed to wake.

Lucius closed his eyes, and relaxed. A simple healing spell took care of the cut on his arm, and he slid his long robe sleeve—specially fitted to hide the Dark Mark from casual view—back across it. No one should look for it. This spell was not exactly common, precisely because it was so hard to cast.

As he watched the agony pour into the woman who had abused a child with Lord-level magical power, he was satisfied. He had asked for as much pain as the spell would grant him. He would have been within his rights to ask for more, he thought, considering what had happened to Harry, but he would then have had to use a ritual that required objects he didn't have with him and which had a much higher chance of both failing and getting him caught. Few people would look for this. The cut was hidden by Potter's hair. The wand that had cast the spell was not his own.

And another had agreed to take the fall.

The last of the yellow light vanished from the blade, and then the knife, too, dissipated. Created by the spell, it could not last past the effects of the curse. Lucius stretched his arms above his head and nodded to Harry's mother.

"For bearing the boy my son loves, I thank you," he said. "For abusing him, I hate you, and always shall." The words were almost meaningless after all he had done to her, but he felt better for saying them. They disclaimed any hint of a debt that he might owe the woman. When dealing with Dark Arts spells of this caliber, it was always best to be sure that the caster suffered from no ties to the victim.

Lily Potter would almost surely be executed. When she was, the execution would be painless and take only a few minutes in the eyes of anyone watching. Lucius planned to attend it himself.

Now, though, he would have the satisfaction of knowing that, however little time it took in reality, in Lily Potter's perception it would seem to last for much longer. She would suffer a year of unending pain in the space of those few moments, the stored agony in her body exploding through her veins. Lucius had given her as much pain as he could imagine her suffering, and that was quite a lot.

He still regretted that he could not have given her a decade of anguish. But that was too risky. He would be satisfied with what he could get.

He woke Potter long enough to cast Obliviate on her and tell her that she would remember only bad dreams, then tossed the blank wand in the air and concentrated on the nonverbal spell that he had told Ollivander to implant into it. The wand burst into flames, and burned away to light ashes that drifted down over Lucius's face and hands. He brushed them off absently and went to the door. No Aurors looking for traces of the wand that had cast these spells would be able to find them now.

Again, he knocked in the prearranged signal. Again, Auror Wilmot opened the door and let him out, but this time he was not alone. With him was the person he had chosen to take the fall and the blame for Lucius's actions.

Lucius arched an eyebrow when he saw that she wasn't restrained or drugged or under Imperius, but looking at him with bright, clear eyes. "Auror Mallory," he said, and bowed. "I am somewhat surprised to see you here."

Mallory shook her head. Now that Lucius thought of it, her eyes did have a gloss to them, but it was the look of fever. Whatever fire consumed her came from the inside and the inside alone. "I would not have lasted much longer," she said. "I longed to hurt them. Now, they are hurt, and I will cast curses to make Rufus believe that I did it. Vengeance is taken, and justice is done." She paused, as if she had to think about the next words. "I am happy."

"You know that you'll be sacked and prosecuted?" Lucius had not really believed Wilmot when he indicated that Mallory was going along with this of her own free will.

"I know." Mallory looked half-restless, twirling her wand between her fingers. "It will be worth it. I have not been able to stand it, seeing the reporters at the Daily Prophet and even some of the people in the Ministry turning against Harry. I wanted to hurt the Potters so badly, but Rufus forbade it. Well, now I'll be able to get my wish, and my spells will conceal the greater pain that you dealt them." Her eyes narrowed at Lucius. "I don't want to know the details just in case something slips out, but you dealt them pain?"

Lucius nodded. "I did."

"Good," said Mallory. The glaze in her eyes had turned to a joyous one as she opened the door to Lily Potter's cell and slipped inside.

Wilmot locked the door again, and shook his head. "She's been quite mad for weeks now," he confirmed, when Lucius looked at him. "She would eventually have gone after them herself, I believe—damn her position and her morals and everything else. They'll know that she could have; she was the one who sent away the guards on the doors. And as long as she confesses to her crimes freely, they have no reason to try her under Veritaserum and look for further things she might be hiding. Scrimgeour's too honorable for that, anyway." Wilmot curled his lip. "Almost the whole Ministry is mad, either for Potter or against him. A few hints, and she took the bait."

"Why aren't you mad?" Lucius asked.

Wilmot laughed softly, a barking sound. "I don't quite feel like giving away all my secrets, Mr. Malfoy."

"The ones I possess are safe with me," said Lucius. He had no reason to question Wilmot in such a way as might make the Auror decide he was a threat. He wanted his useful friend to stay safe in the Ministry. "And who do you believe will become Head of the Auror Office, now that Mallory is disgraced?"

Wilmot shrugged as he recast the glamour over their faces and they walked back towards the lifts. "There are several people the choice might fall on. Scrimgeour won't be able to just make the appointment this time, not when his last choice tortured prisoners. Personally, I think the most likely candidate is Priscilla Burke."

Lucius laughed.

Wilmot shot him a curious glance. "What?"

"She is a person I approve, though never one I would have thought likely to ascend to the post," said Lucius. And now we have more and

more friends within the Ministry, and someone who will glance the other way as long as we keep our games within reason. Better and better.

They returned easily to Wilmot's desk, resumed their seats and their apparent boring conversation, and dismissed the glamours. Lucius rose to his feet a few minutes later and extended a hand to Wilmot.

"A pleasure, Auror Wilmot," he said ceremoniously. "We shall have to do this again sometime."

"Yes, we should." Wilmot clasped his hand and met his eyes with no trace of hiding or flinching. "I have my own reasons to hope that the laws impacting Dark wizards are reconsidered, Mr. Malfoy, and to approve what happened today. I hope that you won't hesitate to seek me out if you need help again."

Lucius inclined his head, and then left, the cage that had held the insects bobbing beside him in its glamoured disguise. He had punished the Potters, got rid of a Head of the Auror Office who could have been a thorn in his side as he reestablished his influence in the Ministry, and secured a useful friend for the future.

All in all, it had been a very good day.

Chapter Thirty-Three: Walk a Thin Line

"I just don't understand how you can do it, Potter, that's all."

Harry had a moment to be glad that Draco wasn't at this meeting of the dueling club, but doing research into his own family background for a spell that he wanted to create. He would have hexed Susan Bones by now. Of course, it was probably only because Draco wasn't here that Susan had dared to begin the subject at all.

Harry glanced around the room from the corners of his eyes. Everyone had stopped pretending to duel now, and was openly staring at the two of them. Harry stifled the urge to hiss. They needed concentration to get the expanded Shield Charm spells right. No, it wasn't Dark Arts, since Remus hadn't been able to be here this evening and supervise them, but it was still a delicate and difficult spell, and they might lose their lives to a Slicing Curse or a similar hex if they couldn't master it.

And now everybody was staring, even Connor, as though they couldn't imagine how Harry could find words to answer this accusation.

Harry sighed and turned back to Susan. "Because the son isn't the father," he said. "Families are important, Bones. I know that." He thought of his parents for a whip-quick moment, and then turned and met his twin's eyes. Connor took a step forward, one brow raised, but Harry shook his head. He appreciated Connor's offer, but he didn't need his brother to defend him. "But you won't get anywhere punishing Draco for what his father did to your uncle. Draco hasn't done anything to you. And he's firmly against Voldemort. He'd have to be, to dare be seen with me," he added, a bit sourly. Surely Draco's constant presence at Harry's side, his actions, should have proven which values he held, even if Susan and the others did distrust every word that came from both Harry's and Draco's mouths.

"But his father killed my uncle," Susan whispered. "And I know that you haven't spoken up against Lucius Malfoy either, Harry. In fact, some of the rumors say that you're working with him."

I should have known it would come to Lucius sooner or later. Harry met her eyes. "I'm sorry about your uncle and your cousins," he said. "And your grandparents, for that matter. I wish those deaths hadn't happened. I wish the First War hadn't happened. But it did, and there's nothing I can do to take it back. The very most I can do is try to help you survive this one, and defeat Voldemort. I won't abandon Draco because of his father, and I wouldn't abandon Lucius unless he tortured someone again. He has changed, Bones. Just as other people can change, you know," he added, thinking he should bring the example a bit closer to home. "Like my godfather did at the end of third year. If someone can go from Light to Dark, why can't someone go from Dark to Light?"

"This is all the same war," Susan whispered. Her eyes were bright with tears, and she could hardly hold her wand steady. Harry thought that was something she would need to get over if she was ever to make any progress in the war. Too easy for an enemy to spring and snatch the wand out of her hand while she aimed it so ineffectively. "That's what my aunt said. And she's the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, she should know. So someone can't change sides in the middle of a war without getting called a traitor. And I still have to avenge the deaths of my uncle and my cousins and my grandparents. And I can't fight on the same side as the son of the man who tortured them to death."

"It's not like he tortured them to death yesterday, Susan," said an unexpected voice behind Harry. "It's not like you even knew them. Give Harry a break, would you?"

Harry blinked and turned his head. Ron was standing there, scratching the back of his neck and wearing an expression that said, "What in the world am I doing defending a Slytherin?" But he didn't move away, even when Susan turned her teary eyes and shaking wand on him.

"You don't understand," she whispered. "My aunt made sure I knew all about Uncle Edgar, how—"

"Yeah, and my mum lost some brothers in the war, too," said Ron. "To Lucius Malfoy, or at least he was one of the Death Eaters who

killed them. Took five wizards to take them down,” he added, with a touch of justifiable pride. Harry nodded. Gideon and Fabian Prewett had been extremely powerful wizards, and some of the first targets of Voldemort’s concerted attempts to remove Light wizards for a very good reason.

“So I’ve lost some uncles,” said Ron. “And yet I’m right here learning beside Harry, and not trying to hex Malfoy. Much,” he said, when Harry glared at him. He had done a fire hex last time that got around Draco’s shields entirely, thanks to Draco’s too-obsessive focus on Harry and a Light pureblood wizard’s innate ability with fire and light, and then been a little too delighted with it. “We need all the allies we can get to win the war, because You-Know-Who is so powerful. I would never ask my mum to fight beside Lucius Malfoy, because she knew her brothers. I never did. They died while I was too young to remember them, or even before I was born. I don’t know the exact year, because Mum doesn’t like to talk about it.”

“Well, my aunt does!” Susan caught her breath on a sob. “I feel like I did know my uncle Edgar, and I don’t want anything to do with Death Eaters, or the children of Death Eaters, or the boyfriends of Death Eaters—” She threw Harry an accusing glance.

Harry grabbed the cold fury that wanted to roll out of him. He was glad, now, that Draco wasn’t here. This was the kind of incident that he would exaggerate for more trouble than it was worth, lengthening the whole thing into insults and hexes. Harry had handled the six Ravenclaws who’d attacked him last Wednesday, and he would handle Susan Bones now.

Come to think of it, it’s a good thing that Snape isn’t here, either.

“Do you think Draco is Marked, Bones?” he asked quietly. “Just come out and say so, if you do.”

Susan frowned. “Of course not. He couldn’t hide it. I’m not saying he’s Marked, just that he’s a Death Eater.”

“But a Death Eater would have the Dark Mark,” said Harry, and took a step forward. He could feel every eye locked on him. Last chance to

settle this without half of Hogwarts exploding at me. He was well-aware that any action, any word, could be the one that would set the dry grass of hearts and tempers in the school afire. "So he's not a Death Eater."

"He thinks like one," Susan muttered.

"How so?"

"I've heard him say Mudblood before."

"He hasn't for a month now," said Hermione firmly, standing up. Zacharias put an arm around her, but Hermione shrugged it off. Harry seized a sliver of amusement, like a thin beam of sunlight, from seeing how much that annoyed Hermione's boyfriend. "I know. I heard him say it in the hallway between classes, and I gave him a lecture about how it was stupid for him to have those prejudices when he was Harry's boyfriend and Harry's mother's a Muggleborn, and anyway Harry would hex him if he heard him say it. He hasn't said it since. He always substitutes Muggleborn."

Harry could feel his eyebrows climbing higher as Hermione recited that. Of course there were things that he didn't know about Draco's life, just as there were things that Draco didn't know about his, but he hadn't even imagined that something like this had occurred. So far as he knew, Draco's prejudices remained unreformed, and he just didn't think about them when he was with Harry, or put Harry in the context of them.

Come to think of it, maybe he didn't change his mind. But he's keeping his mouth shut, and that's a good first step.

"Thank you, Hermione," he said, and turned and faced Susan. "Well? Do you have any other proof he's a Death Eater?"

Susan's face had closed, and she looked away with a mulish expression. Harry relaxed. They were past the most dangerous moment, when Susan might have hexed him and other people would follow her lead or try to defend Harry, and it would all turn very dangerous. Now the atmosphere in the room was more akin to that of

a sulky first-year trying to come up with an insult against snarky seventh-years than dangerous adversaries at each other's throats.

"I didn't think so," said Harry, and glanced around the room, then snapped his fingers. "The club is dismissed for today."

Groans answered him from a few throats, but most people didn't seem that upset. People who were with Susan wanted to sneak away and lick their wounds, obviously, or maybe console each other that, pretty words aside, Harry couldn't possibly be in the right. The neutral Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors just wanted to get out of there; the Ravensclaws had left about the time that Susan started speaking to Harry the way she had. The two Slytherins in the room, Blaise and a fourth-year whom Harry didn't know well, called Aidan Belby, waited with wands held loosely in their hands while Harry got ready to go.

The real surprise was when he started back to the Slytherin common room, and realized that the Weasleys were walking with him—Ron at his side and Ginny near Blaise. Harry gave them a puzzled glance.

Ron returned him a sheepish shrug and smile. "Just wanted to show you that I meant what I said," he said. "You're a Slytherin, and I still think Malfoy's a git, but you're right. And not all the Light pureblood families are mad, I promise."

Harry smiled in spite of himself, and listened to Ginny arguing amiably with Blaise about whether one's allegiance to Light or Dark really gave one better ability with a certain kind of spell, or whether it was purity of blood or individual talent or just sheer dumb luck. Blaise spoke quickly, with determination, but he didn't manage to shut Ginny up. Remembering the hex she'd fired last year, when Ron tried to object to her dating Blaise, Harry doubted there was much her boyfriend could do to manage it—other than a kiss, with lots of tongue, which was in fact what he glanced back and saw them engaged in at one point. Harry rolled his eyes and faced forward again.

That was how he saw someone coming out of one of the dungeon corridors just ahead of them, clad in a Disillusionment Charm that

made it look as though part of the walls was moving, wand low and a curse coming out of its mouth. “Flagellum cruoris!”

Harry whirled, grabbed Ron, and shoved him towards the wall of the tunnel. Ron staggered, off-balance, his breath coming out in a hiss of pain as his shoulders collided with the stone. Blaise and Ginny were safe on the far side behind Harry, and Aidan was just running up behind them, shouting.

Harry continued the whirling motion, and hissed as he felt the curse take him across the shoulders, cutting a pair of crisscrossing lines. The lines were thin, but they sliced through his shirt and his skin and his muscle, and the pain was equally sharp and thin, as though ants were marching on and biting them. The Blood Whip was one of the few curses that, like Avada Kedavra, had virtually no block or shield. It was too wide for Protego, too powerful for Haurio, and reacted badly, as in causing explosions, with most of the other possible wards and barriers. Harry had trained himself with that curse in childhood, and so, though he hurt now, he was not incapacitated as he turned to face their attacker once more.

The figure had paused in shock, as though it had no idea what to do now that its most powerful weapon had failed. Harry used its distraction to snap, “Finite Incantatem!” and watched the Disillusionment Charm melt away to reveal a vaguely familiar Ravenclaw girl.

“Here, I know you,” said Ron, who’d hastened back to Harry’s side, wand drawn. “You’re Marietta Edgecombe.”

Harry remembered her now; he’d seen her dancing at the Yule Ball last year. Marietta raised her head, her face stubborn.

“You can’t say anything,” she warned Harry. “Anything you say could set everyone off, you know it could.”

Harry nodded tightly at her. Slytherin was having enough strained relations with Ravenclaw right now. And anyway, to accuse someone of using the Blood Whip curse was not a matter for a detention and a loss of House points; it meant that McGonagall would seriously have

to consider expelling Marietta. And then, too, Marietta was part of a minor Light pureblood family, and a friend of Cho Chang's. If Harry turned her in for this, he might as well declare open war in Hogwarts's halls.

"Harry!" Ron protested. "You can't not report it. Look at your back, for Merlin's sake!" Ron's temper was gaining speed and ground, and a few sparks dropped from his wand. Harry winced. When Ron was angry, then his magic became half again as powerful, or at least it did since last year when Harry had helped him break through the block that his rage had put on his spells. "I don't know what that curse was, but she hurt you—"

"She did," said Harry. "And she's not going to do it again." He cast the same spell on Marietta's wand that he had on Margaret's, binding her from using magic against him again. After a moment's thought, he added in Draco's name, Argutus's, and the names of everyone standing with him in the corridor. Marietta's eyes flashed, but she nodded.

"Probably the best choice, Potter," she said. "No hard feelings, hmmm?" She gave him a harsh-edged smile. "We both know what's going to happen, sooner or later."

Harry did. There would be a maelstrom of fire. Something would set it off, and he would be at the center of it. He let out a long, harsh breath, his eyes locked on Marietta's. "Was that curse actually aimed at me, or at Ron?"

"I think I'll let you brood on that." Marietta put her wand away with almost offensive slowness, looking far too pleased with herself. "It's going to happen," she whispered, just loud enough to reach Harry's ears. "But we both know that you won't want to push it to happen. Sometimes, Potter, you're ridiculously good-natured. You could have a lot more if you would just exert your power and your temper."

Harry said nothing. He watched Marietta go, and slowly, slowly released his tight grip on his magic. He had wanted to respond with an incantation that would turn the Blood Whip back on its caster,

doubled in strength. It would have flown right at Marietta, and hit her on the front of her body. She might have had her throat sliced open.

My magic and my anger are both too dangerous. But when I don't do something permanent to them, then they get bolder. Harry let a harsh breath travel through his nose. But they can't make me do what they want me to do. They can't make me yield to temptation and use my magic without thinking of the consequences.

"That was stupid," Ron was telling him angrily, when Harry turned around from watching Marietta go. "She used a curse that ought to get her expelled. And you ought to go to Madam Pomfrey." His hand pressed gently, consideringly, against Harry's wounds for a moment, and Harry flinched, his mind suddenly recalled to the pain.

"I know a healing spell for this in one of our Defense Against the Dark Arts books," he said. "I'll be fine."

"Harry!" That came from not only Ron's throat, but Ginny's and Aidan's. Blaise was the only one who seemed to understand, slowly shaking his head.

"Everything'll come out if Potter goes to the hospital wing now," he said. "Edgecombe will be expelled."

"Good!" said Ron hotly. "She deserves to be!"

"And then what will that do to Ravenclaw? Do you want one quarter of the school turned against Potter, Weasley?" Blaise exhaled, his eyes locked with Ron's. "That's what we're looking at right now. If anything's going to happen to punish the people who are hurting Potter, it has to happen in front of other people—Professors, preferably—and the attackers have to seem like ordinary crazed people, not members of a particular House." Blaise shook his head. "That's why they've been so careful to keep their attacks small and isolated so far. Except for Parsons, but she was a special case." He ignored Ginny's mutter about what kind of "special" Margaret was. "It's Harry's word, or Harry's word and ours, against a Ravenclaw's. They're counting on House divisions to help shield them."

Ron looked murderous, but jerked his head down once. "You just better be all right," he said to Harry. "And something should happen to Edgecombe."

Harry frowned, not liking the expression on Ron's face. "If you attack her, it'll seem like a Gryffindor attacking a Ravenclaw."

"I know that," said Ron. "Don't you think I know that, now that the High and Mighty Zabini has explained it all?" He ignored Blaise's scowl. "I didn't say I was going to attack her. Just that something should happen to her."

Harry looked long and hard into Ron's eyes. Ron looked back at him with an absolutely oblique expression that Harry didn't consider fair. Ron was a Gryffindor, and a Weasley besides, famous for their tempers and their transparency. He shouldn't look as cunning as any Slytherin right now.

"Make sure you heal those cuts," he said, and then refused to say anything else until they reached the Slytherin common room, where he nodded good night while Ginny kissed Blaise again. Harry cast a glamour over his back to hide the wounds from the other Slytherins, and stared hard at both Blaise and Aidan as the Weasleys rounded the corner.

"I can count on both of you not to say anything?"

"Of course, Potter, for the reasons I explained," said Blaise. Aidan just nodded, looking a little sick.

Harry nodded back, then entered the common room. A few people glanced at him, but only with the interest that any passage of Harry's excited. They went back to their books and their games soon enough. Harry relaxed. With luck, he could find the healing spell and cast it on his back, and no one would be any wiser but the people who had been in the corridor.

His run of bad luck wasn't over yet, though. When he and Blaise entered their bedroom, Draco was there, looking up with a bright smile from his Transfiguration homework.

“Hi, Harry! What—” His voice cut off as he took in their expressions—or perhaps his empathy was allowing him to feel some of their emotions. He sat up, his own expression racing steadily towards anger. “What happened?”

Harry shot a glance at Blaise. Blaise shrugged. If Harry could cast the healing spell without dropping the glamour, the gesture seemed to say, then he wouldn’t repeat anything.

But Harry knew he’d have to at least see the cuts in the mirror to do this. He only remembered that there was a healing spell, not the incantation, and the Blood Whip Curse was nothing to fool around with. Besides, Draco would probably find out that he’d lied later and be angry as hell. Harry sighed and dropped the glamour, wincing a bit as the pain seemed to increase with the revelation of the cuts.

Draco leaped off the bed and circled around behind him, obviously working out that the damage had to be there since Harry looked fine from the front. Blaise walked over to his own bed and shut the curtains, giving them what privacy he could. Harry appreciated it. He could hardly look at Draco’s face as he let his hand ghost just above Harry’s wounds. He didn’t want to share this.

“Harry,” Draco whispered into his ear. “What curse did this?”

Well, at least it isn’t a promise of fiery vengeance. Harry could live with that. “The Blood Whip,” he murmured. “One of those nasty curses that makes most shields explode when it touches them. I don’t know for sure if it was aimed at me—it might have been aimed at someone I was walking with—but—”

“Whoever cast it probably knew that you would get in the way.” Draco turned Harry towards his trunk, the direction he’d been walking when he dropped the glamour. “You remember a healing spell for it?”

“In the fourth year Defense Against the Dark Arts book,” said Harry quietly, still distrusting Draco’s gentleness. “That’s what I was going to get.”

“You can get it, then.” Draco’s hand trailed through his hair, snagging here and there. The gesture was almost absent, and yet so possessive that Harry gave an uncomfortable wriggle. Draco didn’t appear to notice. “I want you healed as soon as possible.”

Harry fetched the book, removed his shirt, and then went into the loo. With the help of the mirror, he focused on the image of the two whip-cuts, crossed like an X along his back from the top of his shoulders to his waist. Staring intently at the image, he whispered, “Integro et commoveo inresectus.”

The lines of blood narrowed, then unpeeled, as though an invisible whip were taking them away in turn, moving from his waist up to his shoulders and leaving unmarked skin behind. Harry relaxed only long enough for Draco to step up in front of him. Harry watched his expression in the mirror, head still twisted to look over his shoulder, as Draco ran a hand down Harry’s chest.

“Harry,” Draco said, voice slow and soft, crooning and insistent. “Tell me who did this to you, Harry.”

Harry swallowed. He wasn’t frightened of Draco, of course he wasn’t, but there was that stare again—constructed by the lines of his cheeks and his jaw as much as his eyes—that promised intolerable pain for whoever had hurt Harry. It was the same way he had looked when Margaret cursed Argutus. Harry winced at the thought of what he might do to Marietta. “I’m not going to tell you that, Draco,” he said carefully.

“Harry.” Draco pressed a kiss to his temple, then trailed a hand down his cheek. “You know you will.” His voice had turned lulling, hypnotic.

Harry closed his eyes. He couldn’t understand why his head felt stuffed with cotton and cloud, why he felt this wish to surrender. “No,” he whispered, his voice so soft that it lacked conviction.

Draco kissed his other temple. The only sound in the room was their breathing, Harry’s faster and louder than Draco’s. He waited.

It's probably harder to resist because he's touching me, Harry thought, the sudden realization cutting through his mental haze like a sunbeam through fog. I didn't know I was that susceptible, or that I wanted so much to share everything with him.

Maybe he still could. It seemed like a good idea to his clouded brain, at least. "I'll tell you," Harry whispered. "I'll tell you, if..."

"If?" Draco's hand was moving again, skating and hovering above his cheek. It pressed itself to Harry's back next, rubbing in circles, and let Harry remember he was half-naked.

"You promise not to hurt the person who did this." He'd come awfully close to saying "her," Harry reflected, and he didn't want to eliminate half the school from Draco's guessing game. He blamed the hand on his back. It felt good, but not good enough to trigger his panic.

"I can't do that, Harry." Draco's voice was still sweet, without a trace of anger, and that just made him frighten Harry more. "You know I can't. Tell me the name." A sharp kiss to his cheek, with a hint of teeth behind it.

Slowly, successfully, Harry fought himself out of that embrace, and moved towards the door. The mist in his head was finally dissipating. He turned to face Draco, and shook his head.

"Not unless you promise."

Draco cocked his head to the side, and a faint, amused smile curved his mouth. "Harry," he said gently. "You've misunderstood something fundamental about me. You still have the impression that, at bottom, I care as much for the rest of the school as you do. I don't. Your life is more important to me than that of some random Ravenclaw. You're mine. I am going to find out that name. I won't push you now, but I will find it out, and I will punish her."

Harry had the feeling his eyes flickered, but he did his best to maintain the neutral mask. "Who said it's a female Ravenclaw?"

“Because it usually is, lately.” Draco moved past him, still smiling. “Rest now. You’ve been wounded. You need to sleep, and I need to make sure she’ll regret ever being born.”

Harry folded his arms and shut his eyes. The odd atmosphere still lingered around him, made him want nothing so much as to go to Draco and tell.

And is your emotional comfort worth Marietta’s life?

Harry swallowed and shook his head. He was tired after the argument at the dueling club and the pain from the curse and trying to prevent Ron from attacking Marietta and the healing spell. He could rest. He could do that.

Harry heard the first murmurs of excited conversation the next morning before he ever arrived at the Great Hall. Two of the Slytherin prefects were walking in front of him and Draco as they went to breakfast, and Harry tensed in spite of himself when he heard “Ravenclaw.”

“—a foot-long tongue, and her skin turned purple with pink spots! Madam Pomfrey couldn’t figure out how to remove them!”

“Is it true her arm was Transfigured into a chicken wing?” The female prefect’s eyes were bright with enjoyment as she listened, and the male prefect, the one who, it seemed, had actually been in the hospital wing and seen the victim, was happy to oblige her with more details.

“Oh, yeah. And her left foot was a chicken’s talon, original size and everything, so she can’t walk. She’s delusional and blind, and her hair’s grown down the sides of her head and into her skin. I think there might even be more things wrong that I didn’t get to see.” The male prefect’s voice rang wistfully. “But the best thing is that all the spells are interwoven together. To take one off, Madam Pomfrey will have to take them all off, and she can’t figure some of them out!”

The female prefect snickered appreciatively. “What’s her name?”

“Marietta Edgecombe.” The boy shook his head. “I don’t know what she did to annoy the Weasley twins, but I sure hope I never do it.”

Harry felt his shoulders stiffen. Ron. Ron told the twins to get vengeance on Marietta, and they did. It sounded as though they’d launched several hexes or tricks or jokes in her direction all at once, but the interwoven nature of the spells suggested it was more complex and malicious than that.

The worst thing was that Harry couldn’t confront Ron about it. He would be the one to expose the House feud if he did. The prefects weren’t speaking as if these were the actions of a pair of Gryffindors against a Ravenclaw; these were the actions of the Weasley twins against someone who irritated them. Fred and George pranked everyone who would sit still long enough. No one was going to think that Marietta was a special case, that this was revenge for a spell she’d cast at someone else.

Very good, Ron, Harry thought grudgingly. You’re hot-tempered as all hell, but you’re a good strategist. Of course, Ron was a master chess player. Harry shouldn’t have let himself forget that in the face of Ron’s shouting.

Draco caught his arm. Harry looked sideways, and saw his eyes shining like blades in the sun.

“Marietta Edgecombe?” Draco murmured.

Harry knew the expression that flashed across his face said he was caught. Draco gave him the same slow, sweet predator’s smile.

“She’s the one who will regret being born, then,” said Draco, with a nod. “I see.”

“Don’t, Draco,” Harry hissed under his breath as they entered the Great Hall. “The twins got her. Hasn’t she been punished enough?”

“Not nearly enough,” Draco breathed. “Oh, Harry, the things I am going to curse her with.”

“I don’t want you to,” said Harry, deciding that direct appeal was probably the most likely tactic to work right now. If Draco cared about what he wanted, then he should—

Draco just shook his head, and escorted Harry in to breakfast with a hand on his back. Harry made a few more attempts to dissuade him from whatever vengeance was floating around his brain, including arguments about the damage from the Blood Whip being easily reversed and war in the school happening if he took revenge. Draco hummed to himself and ignored him.

Harry hissed in frustration as he sat down at the far edge of the Slytherin table and started to eat. Why does he act all compliant when I do want him to assert himself, and then turn stubborn over things like this?

The post owls came skimming in through the windows, bearing the Daily Prophet. Harry already knew there would be a story about the abuse charges, or about the trial, or about “ordinary citizens” voicing “concern over the loss of Albus Dumbledore” and “false charges,” if the writer was Argus Veritaserum. He made up his mind to concentrate on his food and ignore them.

Draco’s humming stopped. Harry felt the tension inside him crank up another notch, but he kept on eating.

“Harry,” said Draco, and his voice lacked that terrible gentleness. This was actual sympathy. He held the newspaper towards Harry. “I’m sorry, but you have to see this. It’s better now than it will be later.”

Harry swallowed and took the paper, staring blankly. At first, his eyes were drawn to the photograph, and he didn’t quite understand what he was seeing. It looked like Auror Mallory, a triumphant smile on her face, walking between two considerably sterner Aurors down a corridor lined with cells. Harry almost didn’t recognize her. What in the world could have happened to make her smile like that?

Then he saw the headline.

HEAD AUROR ARRESTED FOR CURSING POTTER PARENTS

'They deserved it' Mallory said

By: Rita Skeeter

Harry couldn't bring himself to read the story. He handed the paper back to Draco instead and shoved his chair away from the table.

"Wait a second, Harry," said Millicent, scrambling up and grabbing his right arm. Draco's hand closed around the stump of his left wrist a moment later, in that delicate gesture he used to command Harry's attention. "We're not done yet, and I think someone should go with you."

"I'm fine," Harry whispered. He tried and failed not to think of his parents writhing under the kind of battle curses a trained Auror would know. He tried and failed not to think of the rage Mallory had shown when she came to the school that summer to arrest Lily and Dumbledore. She could do wandless magic. She was nearly as strong as Snape. She would have made them suffer.

He felt his breakfast rushing back up his throat, and tore his arm and his wrist free from Draco's and Millicent's hands. As he ran towards the door of the Great Hall, he caught a glimpse of Connor's face, frozen in horror, and his heart pounded, hard, in guilt. If he had contacted Scrimgeour and asked him to make sure that Mallory wasn't let anywhere near their parents, then perhaps this wouldn't have happened.

"Intestinus erumpo!"

Harry knew he should have been able to block it. He knew he should have had a shield up. Perhaps if the person who cast the spell had been farther away from him at the time, and if pity and guilt and terror hadn't eaten his concentration, he still could have managed it.

As it was, the Entrail-Expelling Curse hit him in the back a second after it was cast. Harry cried out as he felt his belly slit open and his intestines fly out of them, tangling around his feet. The pain was unearthly, unable to stand comparisons to anything else he'd felt

because he'd never felt anything like this before. He dropped to his knees, gasping, knowing even through the haze of agony that he shouldn't move. That was how many wizards reacted to the Entrail-Expelling Curse, and they wound up tangling themselves in their own guts and doing more damage.

Draco was by his side a second later, hands shaking and eyes wide. Harry leaned against him, gasping, closing his eyes as the spell pushed one more tangle of pink and white out of him. He could smell blood and shit and fouler things. He concentrated, pulling on his magic, forcing himself to think of this as a battlefield. The sheer horror of what had happened to him kept trying to push his mind away from the healing spell that might help.

"Finite Incantatem," he said first, just to make sure that he removed the last of the curse. Otherwise, it might be struggling to push his guts out of him even as he repaired his stomach. Shock was quickly descending on him, but Harry fell back into his training, in which such things as shock didn't exist, and there was only what had to be done. "Conglacio." That stilled the movement of his intestines. "Abdo intestinus."

The guts coiled back up inside him, a process that made Harry jerk in Draco's arms and draw several gasping breaths. Merlin, this hurt. But that was no reason to faint. Harry repeated the spell several times, focusing his mind on a picture of what his body would look like, healthy and normal. He knew the damage many curses caused. He just had to reverse his mental picture of the Entrail-Expelling one, and it should be perfectly reversed, everything back in its proper place.

Larger hands steadied him as the last of the pink and white coils settled into place, and then a low voice snarled an incantation that would at least staunch his blood flow and hold the wound in his stomach motionless. Harry blinked up at Snape, his eyes fluttering in time with his breaths now.

"Sleep, Harry," said Snape. His eyes were incandescent with rage, the brightest Harry had ever seen them. "Consopio."

In spite of his curiosity, in spite of his longing to tell them to go easy on the person who had done this, Harry closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Minerva was familiar with Severus Snape's bad moods. She had seen plenty of them—the temper he was usually in when he came out of one of his little chats with Dumbledore, the cold sarcastic anger in which he sometimes dragged one of her particularly mischief-making Gryffindors in front of her (it was usually a Weasley twin), the sneering contempt he used when he thought he knew something she didn't or that had flown above her head.

Until now, though, when his rage burned hot and he actually screamed at her in her office, she realized she had never seen him truly infuriated.

"Someone attacked him in the middle of the Great Hall, Minerva! The Entrail-Expelling Curse! And just because none of Flitwick's little bastards will give up their comrade does not mean that I intend to see this go unpunished!" Severus leaned forward across her desk and glared at her. "I will use Veritaserum and Legilimency with or without your permission. I will find the person who did this."

Minerva maintained the calm mask while she rapidly considered her options. On the one hand, she could hardly do as Severus asked without protests from parents that their little darlings had been forced to take a truth serum or have their minds ransacked. What Severus wanted was between dubious and outright illegal, unless the students actually volunteered.

On the other hand, she knew as well as Severus that if they let this go unpunished, then Harry would never be safe. Madam Pomfrey couldn't be on guard in the hospital wing twenty-four hours a day, and neither could young Mr. Malfoy—though from what Minerva now knew of the boy, she had no doubt that he would try. Someone would enter sooner or later and try to cast another illegal curse, or even a lethal one. Harry might be sleeping. He might not know the counter. Several people might attack at once, overcoming him because of his ethics and reluctance to hurt others.

Something had to be done.

A knock on the door interrupted her before she could tell Severus what she thought their best option was. Minerva sighed and sat up. The only people who knew the password for the gargoyle were other professors and prefects. Almost certainly, one of them would bring more bad news. "Come in," she said steadily.

The student who entered was not a prefect, but a fourth-year Ravenclaw. Minerva stared at her in wonder. It was a moment before she could recall her name, but one didn't forget those large glasses and protruding silver eyes easily.

"Miss Lovegood," she said at last, trying to control her tone. "What are you doing here?"

Luna Lovegood nodded seriously at her. "Headmistress," she said. "I asked the chairs at the Ravenclaw table about who Harry's attacker was. And I have a name now. It was Gilbert Rovenan."

Minerva could see still and terrible anger gathering in Severus's face. He would shout, at any second, that they didn't have time for Luna's nonsense right now, that she was wasting valuable moments when they could have gone hunting for the real suspect, that she must indeed be quite mad to come to the Headmistress's office.

But Minerva was thinking. She knew that Luna should not have been able to enter the moving staircase at all. And she was remembering a girl she had known when she was a Hogwarts student, one who seemed distracted half the time because of objects chattering constantly at her.

"Miss Lovegood," she said. "How did you get up here?"

Luna gave her a patient look. "The gargoyle told me, Headmistress," she said. "It's quite lonely, you know. I think you should talk to it more. I'm just me, but anyone could get up here if they just charmed it for a few moments and got it to give them the password," she added in a tone of censure.

“Ridiculous,” Severus hissed.

“And yet, Severus, here she stands,” Minerva told him, and saw rationality take hold in his mind for the first time since Harry was hurt. His eyes narrowed, and he gave Luna a long look.

“You are a friend of my ward, Miss Lovegood?” he asked.

“Oh, yes.” Luna’s face brightened. “We went to the Yule Ball together last year.” Snape was nodding now, the right chord in his brain obviously pressed. “He was so kind,” Luna continued, “not stepping too heavily on the floor or crushing the benches when he sat down. The furniture all likes him. So the chairs were happy to tell me that it was Gilbert who cast the Entrail-Expelling Curse.”

“Why are you willing to tell us who did it, Miss Lovegood?” Minerva had to ask. The rest of the Ravenclaws, though some of them looked torn, had maintained that they didn’t know who cast the curse.

Luna’s face was solemn. “Because I know for certain, and I’m not Gilbert’s friend,” she said. “I’m Harry’s. He’s been very strange—Harry, I mean. The walls have tried to talk to him, but he can’t hear them. So they’ve been talking to me instead. I know people have been casting curses at him, but Harry always wills other people to leave them alone so strongly that he blocks the walls’ memories. This time, he wasn’t anywhere near the chairs, and they told me about Gilbert.”

Severus had started for the door at a glide, his eyes gleaming. “Severus,” Minerva said sharply. He paused and glanced at her over his shoulder. “Bring him here. Alive, and unharmed,” she added.

Severus studied her intently for a moment, then inclined his head in a sharp nod and left. Minerva hoped her caution would actually work, and that Severus would not pause along the way to “let drop” to his Slytherins who had done this.

“Miss Lovegood, do you know why Mr. Rovenan cast that curse?” she asked her.

Luna sat down carefully, patting the back of the chair she sat in as if stroking a cat. "Because Marietta Edgecombe is his girlfriend," she said simply. "She wound up in the hospital wing this morning, and Gilbert blames Harry for it." She shrugged. "I tried to ask the walls if that was fair, but Harry blocked their memory again."

Minerva decided that she might as well give in to her curiosity, as Severus was most likely bringing their culprit. "This is a remarkable gift you have, Miss Lovegood."

Luna looked at her in mild puzzlement. "Thank you, Headmistress, but really, everything talks. Everything is alive. But most people refuse to listen," she concluded, with a little sigh.

Minerva continued talking to her for the few minutes it took Severus to arrive again. Luna continued to gently deflect her queries. So far as she was concerned, she lived in the actual, normal world, and everyone else was blind, deaf, and dumb. At least, Minerva thought, it would explain the quiet, dreamy girl's inattention in class, if all the objects in sight were simultaneously trying to tell her stories.

Gilbert Rovenan was a burly sixth-year Ravenclaw whom Minerva remembered as an above-average Transfiguration student, though for some reason he hadn't received enough OWL levels to continue into the NEWT class. He tugged away from Snape the moment they were through the office door, and straightened his sleeve. He had blue eyes and dark hair, and wasn't bad-looking, though not much above ordinary in that department, either. He appealed to her without looking once at the silent, and tightly coiled, Head of Slytherin beside him.

"Headmistress, Professor Snape seized my arm and hauled me off," he complained. "Is that fair? He wouldn't even tell me what it was about."

"We know that you cast the Entrail-Expelling Curse at Mr. Potter," said Minerva, choosing to act as if they had certain knowledge from long years of handling Gryffindors who, while they would not lie, would keep silent unless they thought she already had evidence of their wrongdoing.

Gilbert flushed to the roots of his hair, and his face twisted with hatred that Minerva could only stare at. “He hurt my girlfriend,” he said, his voice low and murderous. “I knew the curse. I thought it was only fair that he pay for hurting her.”

Minerva closed her eyes. She knew Severus would wear a triumphant expression, and Luna a sorrowful one. Her decision was already made.

“Mr. Rovenan,” she said, “you will be expelled. Your wand will be broken. You—”

“But you can’t—I have to speak to Professor Flitwick! I want to talk to my parents!” Gilbert’s voice was becoming shrill.

And so, Minerva thought, it begins. She opened her eyes and entered the first skirmish in the war that was about to break out in Hogwarts. This was her battleground now, and while it was infinitely less satisfying to intimidate a sixteen-year-old boy than it was to battle a Dark wizard and Transfigure him into a lump of shapeless flesh, she was not one to shirk her duties.

Harry came slowly back to himself. It felt as if he didn’t awaken, but rather washed in to shore on a wave. First he felt the water, and then the dry sand under his palms, and then the whole scene inverted and he was lying in a hospital bed with someone holding a cup of water to his lips.

Harry drank. The arm that had gently supported his shoulders tightened fast enough to make him grunt in pain, and Draco’s voice called, “Madam Pomfrey! He’s awake!”

Harry opened his eyes, and then blinked as Draco slipped his glasses onto his face. He turned his head to look into at him.

“You could have died.” Draco’s face was pale, and his eyes had that blade-gleam, this time mingled with fear.

"But I didn't." Harry thought it was important to point that out. He wriggled and tried to sit up in the bed, but Madam Pomfrey came bustling out then and scolded him into lying still.

"Not so fast, Mr. Potter," she said. "You've suffered a great deal of shock, you know, and then you disordered things further when you attempted to put your entrails back into your gut all by yourself." She gave him a chiding look as she held her wand over his belly. "So that had to be straightened out. You've been asleep for a day. You'll be staying here at least three more days for observation. That's the minimum length of time it takes to recover from an Entrail-Expelling Curse."

Harry subsided. When he looked around, he could see that Connor, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Blaise, Millicent, Zacharias, Luna, and Neville were there, and he flushed in embarrassment to find himself the focus of so many gazes. Madam Pomfrey went into action a moment later, herding all of them but Draco and Connor out, so that one obstacle was taken care of.

"Merlin, Harry," Draco said then, and hugged him around the neck. "I thought you were dead."

I came closer than I'd like to think, Harry thought. He swallowed a healing potion that Madam Pomfrey gave him, then asked, "What's been happening?"

"They caught the one who cast the curse at you," said Connor. His eyes were furiously alight, and he was twirling his wand between his fingers, ignoring Madam Pomfrey's frowns and pointed looks at it. "His name's Gilbert Rovenan. He's going to be expelled. They've talked it over, Professor Flitwick and the Headmistress, and Professor Flitwick finally gave up pleading for him. He's going." He paused and stared over Harry's bed at Draco. "But not until tomorrow."

Harry glanced at Draco in alarm. He was just in time to see an expression that looked far too much like his brother's on his boyfriend's face.

“And what are you going to do?” Harry demanded. He tried to sit up again, but he was weak enough that Draco held him easily down with one arm.

“Who says that we’re going to do anything?” Connor said innocently. “We can’t get into Ravenclaw Tower, anyway.” He gave a winning smile at Madam Pomfrey, who simply moved away from the bed as if she had no interest in what they were saying. The moment she was gone, Connor leaned nearer and lowered his voice. “We’re going in tonight, Ron and Draco and I, with Fred and George and Ginny and Hermione. Luna’ll let us in, and Cho will join us once we get there.”

“But—“

“Connor, would you leave me alone with Harry, please?” Draco asked then, with unnatural politeness. Connor nodded the same way.

“Of course. I have to get to my dueling lesson with Professor Snape anyway.” He tipped a wink at Draco. Harry wished they would stop that. It was unnerving. “Nine o’clock, then?”

“As we agreed,” Draco said, and Connor left.

Harry started in the moment his brother walked through the doors of the hospital wing. “You can’t hurt him. If he’s going to be expelled, then—“

“You’re wrong, Harry,” Draco said. “Things didn’t fall out the way you thought they would, not when Rovenan attacked you in front of the entire school. None of the professors could ignore what happened. There’s no war between Houses. Most of Ravenclaw is ashamed as hell about it, or, if they’re angry, they have the good sense to shut up. Even the Hufflepuffs are shunning them. Gryffindors and Slytherins are getting along better than we ever have planning revenge for you. Don’t you see, Harry?” he added. “It’s practically incumbent on you not to object to this, in the name of inter-House unity.”

“I don’t want him hurt—“

“You don’t get a choice.” Draco abruptly leaned in towards him, and Harry shrank back. Draco’s words were soft and fierce. “Not this time. Your safety and your well-being matters to more people than just you, Harry, and even to more people than just other Slytherins. You’re not a saint, that we should just forgive whatever happens to you. We’ve been pushed too far, and this is the end.”

Harry shut his eyes. “Nothing I can say is going to stop it?”

“Nothing,” Draco confirmed. “Even if you tell one of the professors, we can get past them, since we have Ravenclaws on the inside we didn’t tell you about. And you’re too weak to get out of bed and go stand guard at the Tower, so unless you’re actually going to compel us to stop, there’s nothing you can do to prevent us. Are you going to compel us, Harry?” His chin inched up.

Harry stared at him, and saw not just the Slytherin determined to take vengeance, nor the Malfoy protecting what belonged to him, but also the boy who had nearly seen his boyfriend die in front of him. Harry remembered the surge of protective rage he’d felt when Greyback went after Draco.

He swallowed and closed his eyes, shaking his head.

“Good,” said Draco softly, and kissed Harry, and then left.

Harry stared at the ceiling, absently rubbing his stomach, and wondered why the hell these things seemed to happen to him so often.

Chapter Thirty-Four: Ravenclaw Tower

Snape stepped back and lowered his wand, blinking slowly. His ears rang from the explosions of smoke and light, and though none of the spells that Potter had hurled had touched him, the effort behind them was much improved.

“I am tempted to award points to Gryffindor,” he murmured.

Potter inclined his head as he put his wand away. He didn't look tired, the way that most young wizards would have after casting that many spells in quick succession. He looked as though flames had taken root in him, hollowed him out, and spread to shine through his eyes. Snape studied him narrowly, and then nodded. He would not have thought it, but then, he had been letting the shadow of James—and of Harry, who was at home in both Dark and Light—blind him. This Potter was more closely akin in his magic to what a Weasley might be able to do. He could hurl much stronger Light spells than he would ever manage Dark Arts. His use of spells based on fire and light was nearly instinctive.

And rage, in this case rage fueled by protectiveness for his brother, enhanced his magic. But it had to be true and righteous anger, not the irritation that he had shown so far in his dueling lessons with Snape.

“But you won't award points, Professor?”

Potter's sly voice brought him back from his contemplation. Snape shook his head. “No, I won't,” he said. “I will the day that you manage to knock me out with a spell.” He grimaced immediately after having made the promise—he never awarded points to the Lion House if he could help it—but what was said was said. And Potter's smile was not as smug as he would have expected, merely confident.

“That's to be expected, Professor,” he murmured. “Now, if you excuse me, I need to meet someone at nine.” And he opened the door and hastened out of the office before Snape could even dismiss him.

Snape thought about taking points for impertinence. Then he thought about the flames behind Potter's hazel eyes—the same flames that he had once seen in the eyes of James Potter across the one battlefield where Snape had ever respected him—and refrained.

He moved slowly over to the simmering cauldron, and resumed brewing his potion. It would look like the Draught of Peace to anyone who came in and looked at it. He could account for all the ingredients to Minerva, and even for his reasons for brewing it. Of course he would want to show the students what a perfect example looked like, since it was an OWL-standard Potion and none of them had yet managed to brew it correctly.

No one but another Potions Master—and few of them, Snape was certain—would have noticed that there was the slightest green tinge to the Draught, a deep and living green like that on the Slytherin crests.

Snape worked swiftly, his fingers shredding and cutting and crushing and stirring without much thought. He would much rather remember the way Harry had looked after the Entrail-Expelling Curse had hit him than concentrate on a potion he had been able to brew since he was seven, or even the variation that he had perfected when he was sixteen.

He wanted to etch the memory of Harry's white and gasping face into his brain. He wanted to savor the realization that had hit him, a former Death Eater who had seen that curse performed numerous times, that this time was different from all the others, and that something in him would have died if he had lost Harry.

That mattered more than all the vengeance he might take, even more than the vengeance he suspected Connor Potter and some other students were on their way to take. It mattered that Harry was alive and healing and had the chance to change. His parents in prison, people paying for what had been done to him, Dumbledore executed or stripped of his magic—what were they but details?

For the first time in his life, Severus Snape could acknowledge that vengeance might not be the best course. He could look back on the

potions he had brewed for James Potter and Minister Fudge last year not with regret that he had got caught, but with regret that he had ever brewed them all, because in brewing them he had hurt Harry.

The words were simple in his mind. He could not figure out why they were such an enormous revelation.

Then he looked down at the green-shimmering potion in the cauldron, and he knew.

Though he would certainly finish this potion, he might not use it. In fact, he might Vanish it the moment it was correctly brewed.

The thought of hurting Rovenan paled beside the thought of hurting Harry.

Draco nodded as Connor came up, completing their group. The other Gryffindors had met him at the base of the final staircase up to Ravenclaw Tower considerably earlier, since they had no dueling lesson with Snape to hinder them.

Granger had a dark frown on her face, and she was tapping her wand against her leg. That was considerably scarier than the two youngest Weasleys, who were either eyeing Draco suspiciously or eyeing the steps in anticipation, but not as scary as the Weasley twins. For the first time Draco had been around them since he'd arrived at Hogwarts, they weren't laughing, nor even smiling. Oh, sometimes they smirked, as when their hands went down and patted their robe pockets. But they weren't laughing, and Draco suspected he was about to see what Fred and George Weasley could be like when they were actually going into battle, not just pranking someone for the fun of it.

"Let's go," Draco whispered. They followed him up the stairs, though he heard Weasley—Ron—muttering about how come Malfoy got to take the lead. His sister shut him up with a few choice words that made Draco hide a chuckle. He wouldn't have thought any Weasley knew those words, never mind the youngest.

No one met them on the stairs. Draco did stop them halfway up to cast Disillusionment Charms on them all. If Ravenclaw Tower was set

up at all like Slytherin or Gryffindor, then the sixth-year boys' room might be a considerable distance from the door. All they really knew was that Rovenan had received permission to spend one last night among his cronies, in his own room, before his ceremonious expulsion and the snapping of his wand tomorrow morning. Chang was going to be their guide once they entered the Tower.

Draco curled his lip, then shook his head. He shouldn't feel so irritated at the thought of Chang, really. She was joining them because of the life-debt she owed Harry; this couldn't make up for it, but taking revenge on someone who had hurt her ally would be a duty for a Light pureblood witch. And Harry had proven conclusively two days ago, as far as Draco was concerned, that he belonged to Draco now.

Smirking at the thought of that, he nearly missed Loony Lovegood's slight movement. She stepped out from behind the tapestry that overhung the front door of the Tower and startled them all. Draco controlled himself and narrowed his eyes, though they narrowed even further when she looked straight at them as if their Disillusionment Charms weren't there.

"Oh, hello," she said. "You might have wanted to choose stronger spells, though. I can see you."

"Yes, but no one else can, Luna," said Granger. Her voice rasped. Draco wondered if she was just impatient, or if Loony grated on her as much as she did on him. Of course, Granger was all about logic and clear ends, so maybe she would dislike anyone as mad as Loony.

And why the hell am I wondering about what the Mudblood, of all people, thinks? Draco shook his head. I'll be as bad as Harry next, insisting on "understanding" people all over the place. I should be thinking about revenge on Rovenan.

As it happened, though, he had the perfect curse, so he didn't need to think about it that much. Loony had already whispered the password to the Tower door, and it swung wide. They followed after her, while Loony hovered to the side and looked around vaguely. That was another reason having her let them in was a stroke of

genius, and Draco had to admit he commended the Weasel—Ron—for having thought of it. No one would think it strange that Loony Lovegood was keeping the door open for a long time, or just standing there and staring into space.

The Ravenclaw common room was considerably warmer than the dungeons, of course, partially because of its location but also because of the many fires flaring along the walls; Draco didn't think he'd ever been in a room with so many hearths in his life. Blue and bronze was everywhere, and smooth, dark furniture dominated the view, if one didn't count the enormous mural of a soaring eagle on the far wall. Staircases sprouted at the other end of the long, narrow room, and even as Chang popped out of a chair near the largest fire and strolled casually towards them, Draco's gaze locked on them.

"This way," Chang murmured, pausing just in front of them. Draco stared at her suspiciously, but then realized there was a faint, rhinestone-colored glow around her eyes. She had on a spell that let her see through glamours and charms, then. It was comforting to realize that, and also to see that almost all the other Ravenclaws remained bent over their books or engaged in agitated, whispered conversations as they passed towards the staircases.

Draco studied the expressions on their faces, and sneered. Most of them seemed embarrassed or ashamed or fearful. Well, they should be. Ravenclaw was currently lowest in the number of House points, extremely unlikely to win the Cup, and Slytherin was preparing to declare a silent war on them. Even the seventh-years whom Draco knew had listened most sympathetically to talk of pureblood purity, and therefore might join the Death Eaters, were outraged that a half-blood had dared to attack someone powerful enough to be a Lord, and that he would only be expelled and have his wand broken in retaliation for that. The argument that the Headmistress couldn't do more than that because Rovenan wasn't of age had been ignored, as it should be, Draco thought. Any proper Slytherin knew there were ways of doing things outside the boundaries of the law.

He had already written to his father, asking him to pursue a few of those ways. If Lucius took Draco's suggestions, the Rovenan family was about to find itself a good deal poorer. They owed debts, it

seemed, or at least his pureblood father did. Lucius only had to buy up a few of those debts, or procure them by favors granted, and then call them in all at once.

Draco rather thought his father would do it. Harry was theirs—the boy Draco loved, the leader they had sworn to follow, his father's truce-dance ally, his mother's all but adopted son. Lucius would probably come up with even more creative punishments, which Draco was all for.

They reached the foot of a certain staircase, and Chang tipped her head at them. "Be quiet," she murmured. "They're having a farewell party for him right now, but there're only a few people up there. They'll hear us coming unless we're careful."

Draco nodded, and made shushing gestures at the others, though he wondered how effective they would be, considering the Disillusionment Charms. He followed Chang as quietly as he could, and the Weasley twins did a creditable impression of sneakiness, too. It was not Draco's fault that Granger and Connor and the two younger Weasleys sounded like elephants.

They reached a door marked Ravenclaw Sixth-Year Boys. Draco rolled his eyes. He supposed Ravenclaws liked everything precise, but there was no need for that kind of nonsense in Slytherin. Everyone knew where the rooms were, and who they belonged to, and who should be in them at any given time of the day.

The room was indeed silent. Chang gave them one more warning glance, and then laid her hand on the door.

She froze. Draco wondered if she'd heard something suspicious. He gripped his wand tightly, waiting for her signal to move ahead.

Then Chang withdrew her hand from the wood, and Draco saw that she was shaking. A moment later, she slumped motionless to the floor. Draco stared down at her in shock. The door had some kind of ward on it. But who would do that, when they're living in common and—

The door to the room burst open, and many, many more Ravenclaws than Draco had expected to be facing rushed out. He could make out Parsons in the back of them, and Turtledove, Parsons's particular friend, and Corner, and Terry Boot, and a few others he knew.

At the head of them all was Rovenan, and his eyes shone with a mixture of desperation and fury.

"Finite Incantatem!" he bellowed, gesturing straight at them with his wand.

Draco felt the warmth of the Disillusionment Charms vanishing, and then Rovenan was on him, and he didn't have much time or chance to think about anything else.

He cast up a Protego, using the instincts that Harry had drilled into him in the dueling club, and so Rovenan's first hex bounced and went straight back at him. He rolled out of the way with what Draco thought were disturbingly battle-trained reflexes, and the hex took down one of the girls behind him. That still left too many for Draco's taste, especially since he was on a narrow landing with his allies ranged behind him and below him on the stairs, but at least he had a moment to breathe and think, and settle on the curse that he would like to use next.

It has to be a battle curse, not a vengeance curse. And no Dark Arts unless absolutely necessary.

Rovenan was already spitting out the first syllables of what sounded like a Dismemberment Curse—and where the hell had he learned so much about Dark Arts?—but Draco was faster than that. The Dismemberment Curse had at least eight syllables. He only had to speak four.

"Rictusempra!"

Rovenan began to laugh, and his wand trembled in his hand. Draco watched for a moment, and decided that he was not going to drop it. He didn't allow himself more than a moment to make that decision, remembering the lesson that Harry had tried to drill into him, and

Professor Snape, and their battle on the night of the full moon: The wizard left alive on the battlefield is often the quickest.

“Expelliarmus!”

The wand soared from Rovenan’s hand to Draco’s. Rovenan’s eyes flashed, but he didn’t look a bit fearful, even as Draco stuck the wand in a pocket and clapped his left hand over it. Instead, he turned halfway around, crouching, and began yanking at his robe.

A pair of bright yellow pebbles soared over Draco’s head and smacked down in the middle of the landing. One of the twins yelled, “Cover your nose!”

Draco had time to heed the warning. The several Ravenclaws on the landing, who were packed together and probably hadn’t seen exactly who they were facing yet, didn’t.

Plumes of yellow smoke burst into being from the pebbles. They didn’t drift and dissipate like smoke, though, but maintained a solid fountain shape, like water, heading straight for the Ravenclaws. A few of them took it right in the nose, and began to moan. Draco watched as red blotches broke out over their faces and their eyes swelled shut, and chuckled in spite of himself. It looked as though the twins had given them a nasty allergic reaction to something.

He felt a shove at his side, and then the Weasley sister was on the landing with him, just as Parsons aimed her wand. Parsons said something that sounded nasty and twisting, not a spell Draco was familiar with, and a dark line sprang from her wand and head towards Ginny.

Ginny blocked it with Haurio, another shield spell Harry had been drilling into the dueling club, and then cast the Bat-Bogey Hex. Parsons clapped her hand over her nose, yelping indignantly.

Draco tried to press forward, to get to Rovenan and stop whatever he was doing, but the landing was too small and too filled with too many people. The Ravenclaws who’d succumbed to the twins’ pebbles had fallen, and the others in the room were pushing their way out now.

With a grimace, Draco knew they'd have to retreat down the stairs and hope they didn't caught on the carpet or tripped up—or worse, met by Ravenclaws from below. Draco had the impression that most of those in the common room had been caught by surprise, but surely that couldn't last.

He tapped Ginny on the shoulder and began to move backward, keeping up his Protego to get rid of the hexes and jinxes and curses coming his way. He strove to keep his head clear and his breathing even. Now was not the time for the kind of amateur heroics that Gryffindors favored. Just be steady, and they would all reach the bottom and be able to fight their way out of here.

Abruptly, all the magic around them turned foul. Draco gasped and began to cough. He felt weak in the knees. He bent over, closing his eyes, despite the fact that he wanted to stay upright and keep his hold on his wand. He'd never felt evil before, he thought, but he was feeling it now.

He remembered what it had been like on the battlefield when the bitch werewolf had tried to kill Harry. It had hurt to possess her and cast the Killing Curse on her, but he'd managed to do it, because he knew he had to. Harry was right. Push through this, and do what needs to be done.

He stood, and was glad to see that the female Weasley had retreated down to the step behind him, and that the rest of the Ravenclaws were coughing and gagging just like he was. A few of them had fainted. One or two were staring at Rovenan with looks of horror on their faces. Rovenan was coming forward, his face flushed, but he was seemingly otherwise unaffected by the magic. Maybe he's the source of it, Draco thought, though he didn't understand how that could be, unless he was capable of wandless magic.

He understood everything when he saw the bared and gleaming Dark Mark on Rovenan's forearm.

Harry said something like this happened once, that one of the Death Eaters he fought on the beach last summer turned all the magic foul. It's a last-ditch trick, apparently, but one that can be effective.

It was no longer working on Draco, though. He was stone-cold sober, and he knew what Rovenan was trying to do. He really had been trying to kill Harry, and playing on his House's general pigheadedness to hide his intent. And it had been awfully strange, hadn't it, Draco thought, his mind clattering along like the Hogwarts Express, that so many Ravenclaws were casting high-level Dark Arts spells like the Blood Whip and the Entrail-Expelling Curse?

Rovenan locked eyes with him, and his smile suddenly faltered, as though he realized Draco was neither choking nor flinching from him in panic. He thrust his Marked arm forward. Draco choked once, but he gripped his wand and prepared to use a Dark Arts spell. He could, now. A Death Eater was fair game.

"Draco! Do not."

Draco didn't move—he wasn't that foolish, to take his eyes off his enemy—but he felt every hair on his neck rise and tingle. Professor Snape was here.

Snape felt it the moment the Dark Mark went into action, befouling all magic in the immediate area.

He felt it even though he was in the dungeons and he knew the befouling was happening several floors above. Hogwarts was pure of such evil influences, since Snape would never have used his own Mark in such a way. That made the sudden presence of this particular vicious trick as noticeable as a fire in the midst of a closed room. He rose, and he turned his head, and he let the sucking presence lead him.

Once he was out of the dungeons, he knew it was coming from Ravenclaw Tower. He altered his direction, then. As a teacher, he knew several little-used passages that ran towards the Tower, and they would cut down on the length of time that he had to spend running, since this bloody school wouldn't let him Apparate.

He reached the tapestry, and realized he had no idea what the password was. He didn't care. He lifted his wand, and his magic

coiled in him and whirled around, and his Reducto smashed the door, and the tapestry with it, to bits.

That particular spell was safe. It was used by wizards of the Light as well as the Dark, and for all that his own Mark was burning on his arm now, it wouldn't poison him—yet. Any use of Dark Arts in the befouled area would. Light spells were safe for at least the next half hour.

He tore through the common room, murmuring spells that repelled the bodies trying to run at him, the screaming students who didn't have an idea what was going on and probably never would. Snape felt a surge of contempt even through the worry he was feeling right now. How could students reach their seventh year in Hogwarts and yet still be so innocent? They should train them better. Were it not for the curse on the position, he would ask Minerva to let him teach Defense.

And then he saw the knot of struggling bodies on the staircase, and knew his destination. He also saw the moment that Draco Malfoy straightened, fighting back against the overwhelming influence of the twisted magic, and knew that he was about to use Dark Arts, because that was what he would naturally turn to, with the training that Lucius had given him during his childhood and the way he knew war.

“Draco! Do not.”

Snape assumed Draco had heard him, since he didn't collapse and shrivel into a withered husk in the next moment. Snape cast Wingardium Leviosa on himself, so that he could rise to his Slytherin's level in a very short time. He wasn't about to bother with the stairs, given that it was crowded with Weasleys.

He knew only three ways to stop the poison the Dark Mark was spreading. One was for the Death Eater who had invoked it to end it willingly. Snape doubted this one would do so, since he'd kept it burning for so long already. Another was for the Death Eater involved to Apparate or Portkey out—impossible, because of the wards on Hogwarts and this room in particular, though Snape supposed the fool might make it to one of the common room's many fireplaces and Floo.

The third was for the Death Eater involved to die by a Light spell. Snape feared that course was the one he would have to take. He would see who the Death Eater was first.

He lifted his head, and was surprised and not surprised to see Gilbert Rovenan standing with his left forearm bared in front of Draco. The boy hadn't seemed any more likely to be a Death Eater than anyone else, but Snape had barely known him, and he would have had an excellent hiding place, in the pit of chaos that Ravenclaw House had become of late.

Rovenan smirked at Snape, as if asking what the professor intended to do to him. Snape leveled his wand, holding the boy's eyes all the while. He saw excitement in them, and vindictive glee, and no awareness of what he had done. Snape could understand that. He'd once felt much the same way, the first time he attacked a Muggleborn home as a Death Eater and saw the inhabitants cowering in front of him, someone paying him respect at last.

There were all sorts of routes by which Voldemort might have snared this boy. Perhaps he had been promised power and glory. Perhaps a family member had recruited him. Perhaps Karkaroff or Mulciber, during the time they'd taught Defense Against the Dark Arts last year, the most laughably named class in the whole of Hogwarts, had talked him into it.

Snape would never know, unless both of them managed to survive this confrontation, and he did not think they would. As he knew the emotions in the boy's eyes, he knew what the likely outcomes would be. And when it had been him in Rovenan's place, the earth could have shaken and he would not have yielded his loyalty to Voldemort, so convinced was he of his own rightness.

Snape felt something in him shift and click forward, a mixture of sorrow and utter determination that settled easily into place even though he had never felt it before. He had once been a loyal, joyous Death Eater, and then, after Regulus, he had gone cold to survive. There had never been this feeling, the regret mingled with the knowledge that he was ready to kill.

“Gilbert,” he said, using the boy’s first name in an effort to connect with him, his empathy for him in that moment outrunning even the remembrance that he was Harry’s attacker. “Will you stop it from burning before it turns every spell in the school deadly?”

Rovenan curled his lip and laughed. Does he know, Snape wondered, can he know, that the spell is killing him even as it works? There was a reason that Death Eaters used this magic so little and only at great need, and usually ended it as soon as possible. “No.”

And Snape would not let him leave here, not alive, not when he would join the ranks of their enemies and create more trouble.

The determination pushed forward and into all the corners of his mind, crushing out any other thoughts. Snape lifted his wand.

“Reducto.”

He spoke it softly, but with all his magic behind it, concentrating on Rovenan’s body as a barrier, an obstacle.

Rovenan soared. He soared across the landing and hit the wall of the tiny space—not far, but with considerable force. He hit the wall with an impact nothing could have survived, a crack that Snape knew would have ground some of his bones to powder. More to the point, it snapped his neck.

And the befouling stopped.

Snape knew how loud silence could be, but he hadn’t heard this particular silence in a while, the shocked and hurting silence of children who had just witnessed death for the first time. He turned, his mind spinning along the course that it would need to take now, and wondered if this was the way that Harry felt all the time. If so, he was no longer sure if he feared for his charge so much as felt sympathy for him.

“I will take you back to your Houses,” he told Draco and the Gryffindors he’d brought with him. He paused, and swept his eyes

over the gaping Ravenclaws beneath him. "I will also summon Professor Flitwick to attend to you," he told them. "If you have questions about why I have done this, check Rovenan's left arm. But first," and he swept his wand around and down, "abscindo manulaes laevaes!"

The left sleeve of every student in the room fell away, exposing their forearms. Snape raked them with cold eyes, searching for some sign of the Dark Mark. He didn't know whether or not he should relax when he saw none. There could be Ravenclaws in their rooms who were Marked. He would certainly tell Filius to look for it.

Right before he himself checked his Slytherins, and then turned himself into Minerva and let her decide if she could continue to employ a teacher who had just killed a student.

Draco returned to the dungeons in stunned silence, pacing alone beside Professor Snape after they'd spoken to Professor Flitwick, and delivered the Weasleys and Granger and Connor to Gryffindor Tower. He still didn't know what to make of the utter collapse of their vengeance plan. In an abstract way, he supposed it was for the best. They weren't going to get into trouble for their actions, not when so much else had happened, and Rovenan definitely wouldn't be bothering Harry again.

On the other hand, the thought that there had been at least one Death Eater in the school filled him with deep shock, and the impulse to return to the hospital wing again and make sure that Harry was still safe.

And then there was the fact that Rovenan had managed to learn of their vengeance plan at all. Draco had already figured out the only way he could have learned of it. He longed to look at Professor Snape and know that he had been wrong, but he hadn't developed the courage to raise his eyes yet.

Snape stopped him with one hand on his shoulder as they reached the door to the Slytherin common room. Draco looked up at him at last, and saw the knowledge of war in his House Head's face, more clearly than he had ever seen it before.

“How many in Slytherin House knew of this vengeance plan, Draco?”
Snape asked softly.

“Lots of people,” Draco whispered.

Snape nodded. “And one of them betrayed it to Rovenan.” He closed his eyes in a long, slow blink. “You know as well as I do that, given the circumstances, only one kind of loyalty could trump the loyalty of Slytherin to Slytherin.”

“I know,” said Draco weakly. So, I wasn’t wrong. Someone in our House is a Death Eater.

Snape took a deep breath, then spoke the password and stepped into the common room.

It was quiet. The whole of the House, it seemed to Draco, sat on the couches and divans and chairs by the hearths, waiting for them. They would have heard what had happened by now, of course. News never stayed still for long in Hogwarts, and the prefects, patrolling the corridors, would have brought back rumors, and then confirmation, of the battle in Ravenclaw Tower.

Blaise snapped out, “Everyone, stand up now.”

Everyone stood up, and turned their bared left forearms towards Snape and Draco. Draco felt his heart seize up as he realized what they were proving. He relaxed a bit with every expanse of unmarked skin he looked at.

Snape said, in a voice like the Draught of Living Death, “Where is Montague?”

Draco closed his eyes.

“Gone to the Dark Lord.” Blaise’s voice was calm, and surprisingly steady, though Draco knew that, if he looked, Blaise’s dark face would be nearly gray. “We found enough evidence in his room to convict him, sir. Nothing very useful, but some of it incriminating.”

Snape made a low noise. Draco wondered, with that same odd interest that had made him wonder what Granger was thinking on their way to Ravenclaw Tower, whether he was blaming himself for not keeping one of his students from treading the same mistaken path he had followed.

It's not his fault, Draco thought, and reached up to ghost his hand across Snape's elbow, wondering if he could convey that message with just a touch.

Snape shook his head, and seemed to snap out of his trance. "I am going to speak with the Headmistress," he said. "None of you will wear left sleeves for the next week." He didn't ask whether they understood, whether they would obey. They would, or he would know the reason why.

Blaise and Millicent, who stood the closest to Snape, actually bowed their heads as he left. Draco took a deep, shaky breath, and sat down on the couch with his yearmates. For the first time all term, Pansy reached out and took his hand, though she didn't speak.

"Harry's going to be all right," Blaise whispered. Draco looked up, and saw the force of new conviction in his eyes. Blaise had never been as close to Harry as the rest of them, perhaps because his mother wasn't allied as deeply as Hawthorn Parkinson, or the Bulstrodes, or Draco's own parents. Now, though, he obviously understood how close the war could scrape to them, and what the opposite side looked like. It might be a commitment born less of loyalty than of fear, but he would stay true, Draco thought, and other reasons might grow later. "I promise, Draco. He really will be. You have no idea how he's going to be guarded, from now on. And the rest of the school is going to see just how free of the Dark Lord Slytherin House can be."

Draco thought it was weak of him, that it was happening mostly because he was too tired to feel anything else, but he found hope in Blaise's words. He nodded, once, and then let the rest of them hustle him off to bed. A few other Slytherins left as they went up the stairs. Draco blinked at them, then nodded again. They would use their

cunning to evade the professors and prefects of other Houses, and get to the hospital wing unnoticed.

Harry would not be alone or unguarded tonight, perhaps not ever again, until the war was over.

Draco felt a little bubble of fierce pride pop up through the numbness that had largely overtaken him. The other Houses have always looked down on Slytherin. Well, now they're going to see that we're more like them than they thought, and not just when we ally with them to avenge a Housemate. We can be as proud, as independent, as determined to fight, as they can.

Snape stood in silence before Minerva. He had told her the whole tale, and he had no idea what would happen next.

He could not help remembering another night, when he had come to Albus, and Albus had looked him in the eye, and in the soul, and tested him under Veritaserum, and then accepted his repentance as true. Snape had known the man Albus was, then. He did not know the woman Minerva had become, not that well. He knew she might sack him, might turn him over to Ministry Aurors, who would not be gentle with a former Death Eater who had acted like a Death Eater again, or might do nothing. He had no way to be sure.

"Severus."

Snape glanced up. Minerva was leaning forward, her gaze brilliant, catching the light from the torches on the walls like gleaming cat's eyes.

"You say that the evil from the Dark Mark would have poisoned the school?" she questioned.

Snape nodded. "Dark Arts first, then Light spells. Any magic performed in Hogwarts after that first half hour would have killed the person who cast it. Rovenan would have died eventually, but not until the poison had slaughtered anyone who had gone unwarned."

Minerva breathed in, breathed out, and waited as if for a sign, though Snape didn't know what it could be. Then she raised her eyes and said, "You defended the Ravenclaws, the school, a student in your own House, and your ward, against a Death Eater. So far as I am concerned, you deserve commendation for that, not condemnation."

Snape closed his eyes. He could feel relief crashing down over him, a torrent so great that he could not really respond to it as yet. He waited.

"I will contact Mr. Rovenan's parents," Minerva went on. "I will also see about securing his body, so that no—ah—surgery can be performed after the fact to disguise what he was. And I will speak for you, Severus. I will fight for you. You warned him, you asked him to reconsider what he was doing, and he did it anyway. And this was after he had used a lethal curse on another student." Minerva's hands tightened on the edges of her desk. Snape half-expected to see them grow claws.

"Death Eaters," she said.

Snape blinked at her, not quite understanding the chain of her thoughts.

"There were Death Eaters in my school," said Minerva, and she rose and paced back and forth. "Threatening my students."

She swung around, and Snape fought the urge to take a step backward. Voldemort had just vexed Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress of Hogwarts, very, very thoroughly indeed.

"Go to sleep, Severus," Minerva said quietly. "I will reassign some of the wards to watch and guard Harry, and I will speak with Filius about his Ravenclaws, and whether he has discovered any more of—them—in his House. Know that you have my gratitude, and that I will fight for you." Her eyes were still brilliant with fury. "Anyone who tries to hurt you, or suggest sacking you for defending the school, will have to go through me."

Snape nodded several times. He didn't seem able to do anything else. He had thought before that Minerva McGonagall would be a very

different sort of leader from Albus Dumbledore, but he had not realized just how different. She was not going to use manipulation. She very obviously did not need it.

He walked slowly back towards his offices, though he surrounded his body with shields and wards so that no one could sneak up and attack him on the way there. No one tried.

When he reached the office, he looked down at the ruined modification of the Draught of Peace, and Vanished it.

Then he called his Pensieve to him from across the room. He knew that he should follow Minerva's sound advice, and sleep soon. The past three days had cost him more than he realized he had to give.

But, first, he wanted to place certain memories he had in the Pensieve, and attempt to discover what they meant. When he had been up in Ravenclaw Tower, trying frantically to figure out whether anyone was about to cast Dark Arts in the midst of Rovenan's befouling, he had felt something else—a kind of drifting fog, a mist, a vicious presence that nevertheless did not feel like Dark Arts. The memory had tried to depart his mind the moment he noticed it, but he had trapped the impressions and slid them into an Occlumency pool, so fast that they didn't have a chance to escape.

He drew out the battle, placed it into the Pensieve, and then lowered his head to go under the surface of the silvery liquid. He would watch, and try not to get distracted by the sight of a dying boy too like the one he had been, and figure out what the hell that mist was.

It might be something that could hurt Harry. If it was, then Snape would find it out, and destroy it. It was part of what he, a man with chosen loyalties, did.

Intermission: Power Play

Albus kept his eyes closed even as Hestia Jones walked around him, now and then murmuring soothing phrases or casting spells that eased his cramped muscles. It had been dangerous for Argus Veritaserum to arrange to sneak Hestia in again, and she could not stay long. Truly, Albus was not sure that it was worth it. He could have ruminated on his own failure just as effectively under the Still-Beetle imprisonment, and had many times over the last few weeks, as he realized how and why his spell had gone wrong.

That didn't keep his mind from returning to it now, and raking his own failure over the coals obsessively.

He had cast the spell intending to change anyone's perception of Harry from a favorable one to one that would hinder Harry, and keep him emotionally unprepared for opposing his parents and Albus. His friends should have become overprotective. His allies should have made mistakes in their rage that would get them killed. His enemies should have tried everything in their power to hurt him. Students with slightly negative feelings towards Harry would have them exaggerated, and should have made Hogwarts a battleground for him every day. Albus had known that his spell would leave those caught between two states of mind unaffected—notably, the Lestranger woman Minerva had hired, and werewolves—but they were only a very small portion of the wizarding population. There was no danger that anyone would figure out what was going on, at least, since the spell would steer the thoughts of anyone who did begin to figure it out away from that dangerous information, and then eat the memories.

His thoughts could spread along with the effects of the spell, and he would observe everything that went on, though he was powerless to alter it. Albus had believed that would content him. He would see how Harry slowly collapsed, and realized that the wizarding world on his own was too much for him. He would be a less than effective witness when the time came for Lily's and James's trial, and some members of the Wizengamot would be hostile to him, so they were likely to go free. The same thing would happen with Albus, he was sure. More of the public was willing to think him innocent, someone they loved and

revered and knew worked for the good of the wizarding world, than two people who had lived in retirement so intense that their once-sterling reputations had faded. With Argus's tireless work in the press, and the spell, and Lily and James gone free, and even Harry likely to plead for him at the last, Albus was sure that he would see the outside of the Ministry again in March.

It hadn't happened. The spell had taken hold in Ravenclaw at Hogwarts, the House it had identified as the one with the highest level of hostile feeling for Harry, and influenced its students just as Albus had hoped. Some members of the Wizengamot, and those in the Ministry, muttered about how they had never trusted Harry; one could not trust a child with Lord-level power who refused to Declare for Light. A few of those who favored Harry, like Auror Mallory, had indeed become overprotective.

But Harry's allies and those closest to him—his brother, Severus, young Malfoy—had continued unchanged in mind. Albus had been startled, but concluded that, of course, powerful Dark wizards like Charles Rosier-Henlin were cautious and not used to moving immediately, no matter what their emotions might urge them to do. And Severus was limited by his position at Hogwarts from leaving for long periods of time, and young Malfoy was limited by his age and his need to be near Harry constantly. Eventually, the balance would tip, and they would make Harry's life as miserable as his enemies were doing.

And still it had not happened, and only on the night of the Woodhouse battle, when Albus had had the opportunity to compare the thoughts of the transformed werewolves to the thoughts of the fighting Dark wizards, had he realized the reason.

The mind of Charles Rosier-Henlin was as unchanged as the mind of Hawthorn Parkinson or Remus Lupin. Henrietta Bulstrode was a bit more influenced, but then, she was currently more of an enemy than an ally to Harry. Lucius Malfoy's desire for vengeance had heightened (and while Albus was sorry for Lily and James, he could not have Hestia reveal Lucius without revealing his own spell), but he had conceived the plan on his own, before Albus began to spread his

change. The others seemed in the same boat as Charles and the werewolves.

When he pulled back and looked at them more carefully, then Albus had seen what appeared to his eyes as numerous tiny silver hands at work in each of their minds, doing nothing but unbind his webs as fast as they formed. They could not give Harry's allies the memories of his spell, because Harry himself didn't know the spell existed. But they could and did prevent those webs of compulsion from tightening much, unless the person in question already had a bit of evil in mind.

Harry was so much a vates that he had spread an unconscious influence of his own in response to Albus's spell, to tear it apart. He wanted freedom, and endless possibilities, for those he cared the most about, and for those who had chosen to follow him. If they volunteered to be overprotective, or to turn against him, that was one thing. If he did not know them well, or if he blamed them for something, as he blamed Auror Mallory for the arrest of his parents and Albus, his protection did not extend over them. But Harry and his magic and his will would shield the people whom he felt he did owe something to from an outsider attempting to transform them against their choices.

Albus had never thought that he would face a true vates. Even after the boy began to show signs, there was still a large chance that he might turn aside from the path. How he could maintain it? Falco Parkinson had assured Albus that it was impossible, that one would have to sacrifice his magic in order to free the magical creatures and allow other wizards and witches to grow to their greatest extent. And no Lord-level wizard would ever do that. Their magic was too much a part of them. It sang within them, and they either lived with it and used it for the good of the wizarding world, or they had a need to increase it and corrupt others with it, as had happened to Tom.

But it seemed that that had not happened with Harry. He was vates, unbinder, destroyer of peace and safety. He was so much a vates that he sensed webs as they were forming and fought them away. Albus suspected that Harry's magic would have revealed the memory-destroying portion of the spell, too, save that it actually

destroyed the memories and didn't simply bind them. Harry appeared incapable of tolerating a web anywhere near him.

It frightened Albus immensely to think that his beautiful, delicate wizarding world, that fragile soap bubble he had fought so hard to protect, might be shattered at last. The wizarding world was webs all the way down, webs that insured most wizards and witches never needed to think about things like where their next meal was coming from or a centaur attacking them. Albus loved the world as it was. How could he stand aside and see it torn apart by well-intentioned but ill-guided revolution, by a will to freedom that would not even take note of all the wills to tameness standing to oppose it?

"My lord."

Albus blinked and came out of his daze. Hestia gently held a cup of water to his lips, and he drank and then nodded to her.

"I only need cast one spell today, my dear," he said, and then closed his eyes.

He would not end his compulsion—not yet. Severus was on the brink of figuring it out, but he would still not know what it meant, having no acquaintance with spells of that kind. It would depend on him speaking to just the right person, such as the Lestrangle woman, and Albus was willing to risk that that might happen. He had been willing to take gambles so far, such as vengeance falling on Lily and James, in order to defend the larger wizarding world. This was only another of them.

But he did murmur, "Transformo Kingsley Shacklebolt."

His compulsion coiling lazily around Kingsley's mind tightened into a web. Albus suffered a brief burst of gladness that he could at least control Kingsley, whom Harry did not like much and had not shielded.

He felt sorrow as he concentrated, pouring what remained of his magical strength after the wide-spreading compulsion into this spell. He was sacrificing another of those who followed him, as he had sacrificed Lily and James to Lucius Malfoy's vengeance, as he had

once sacrificed Harry and Connor to Voldemort's attack. But he was well-used to these decisions now, and he knew he was saving something larger than any one person: the wizarding world he fiercely loved and would not see crumble. He was willing to be damned, as long as the wizarding world could survive.

He knew matters had gone too far. Whether it was on purpose or not, Harry was a fully-fledged vates, intent on performing his dangerous miracles of change and transformation. It was not to be borne, not when he did not think enough of other wizards and witches and their welfare.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt, damnari inter sicarios," Albus murmured.

The compulsion funneled in a very specific direction, gnawed a small home for itself in the midst of Kingsley's mind, and settled there. It would spring to life only on the day of Lily and James's trial, the sixteenth of November, which was not very far away now.

Albus's heart was aching when he opened his eyes, and tears filled them, but he met Hestia's eyes and said, "You will tell no one of what you heard here?"

The young witch stood proud and strong, all but radiating loyalty. She shook her head. "No, my lord. Never. You are only doing what you have to do to protect our world."

Albus nodded back at her, and then let her use the Still-Beetle to confine him again. At once his mind roamed out on the wings of his spell, seeking to watch Harry, this time. His thoughts were filled with mourning.

I am sorry, Harry. But when it comes down to a danger that may threaten everyone else, there can be no faltering. If I do this one thing with a firm hand, then our world is saved—twice over, because the prophecy will have to choose your brother. I am sorry. But I think that, if you were in my position, if you were in the position you occupied even three years ago when you thought about other things than your own goals and life, you would agree with me.

Chapter Thirty-Five: Stronger Than You Think

By the time he was finally able to leave the hospital wing, Harry had become used to the idea that the world had changed, but he still hadn't adapted well to one feature of it that looked to become permanent.

"There's really no reason for you to keep attending me now," he told Adrian Belby, who was the only one of the three Slytherins escorting him from the hospital wing back to the common room whom he knew at all well. "Madam Pomfrey says I'm past the danger from Rovenan's curse, and I can see people coming more easily than I could lying in a bed. I should be fine."

Adrian just looked at him. He was vibrating slightly with a pride that never seemed to leave him. Harry had seen the first signs of it when he showed up for his first round of guard duty with the bare left arm that he still sported. "You need to be guarded, Harry," he said simply. "So we'll stay and guard you."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," said Harry, keeping his temper with an effort. At least when Blaise or Millicent or Draco were with him, it was like talking with friends; he could forget they were there to protect him. Adrian and the others took it all so seriously. "I don't need guards now."

"Yes, you do."

Harry jumped. Adrian and the others reached for their wands. The Weasley twins ignored them all, falling into step with Harry as if they'd just met for a bit of a friendly chat. Harry smiled in spite of himself when he saw their bare left arms. Each bore a constantly moving lime-green tattoo that said VOLDEMORT IS AN IDIOT. Now and then, the insult changed.

"We're happy to share the duty," said the one Harry thought was Fred. He spoke to Adrian. "We have NEWT Transfiguration first thing on Monday, but that's the only class it would actually hurt us to miss. We can skive off the others and send illusions to them. What times do you most need an extra pair of hands?"

Adrian thought about it. Harry opened and closed his mouth several times. No one, of course, paid the slightest attention to him.

“Wait,” he said. “Don’t I get a say in this?”

“No,” said Adrian, “because sometimes you’re an idiot, Harry.” It sounded as if he’d learned that by rote. He turned to Fred. “Tuesday mornings are thin right now. So are Wednesday afternoons. And you never know when someone might try to take advantage of a Quidditch practice.”

A devilish grin replicated itself on both twins’ faces. “Why, Belby,” said the one Harry thought was George, “you’re actually inviting the Gryffindor Beaters to watch your team’s movements?”

Adrian paused, obviously abashed.

“No, he isn’t,” said Harry, and used a tone of voice that made them look at him and actually pay attention. “I am taking my safety seriously, I promise you. But Rovenan is dead, and we need to pull the school together, not yank it apart.” He nodded to their bare left arms, including his own. “That kind of thing is a fine symbolic gesture. I have no problem with it. By guarding me all the time, though, you make it seem as if you fear for my life.”

“We do,” said Adrian.

“And would you trust a Slytherin near me faster than a Ravenclaw?” Harry demanded. “You must. All my guards so far have been Slytherin.”

“That’s about to change,” said George.

“Gryffindors are a good start,” Harry agreed. “But we have to have some Ravenclaw guards, too, or this all looks useless—like we’re suspecting a House instead of the one member who turned out to have other problems.” He ignored the twins’ laughter and imitations of what they thought Voldemort tempting Rovenan must have looked like. “I want Cho. And Luna. And Draco said there were a few

Ravenclaws on the inside of the Tower whom they trusted, who would have gone after Rovenan if they were shut out. I want to know who they are.”

“That’s actually a good idea, Harry,” said another of his guards. She was Catrina Flint-Digsby, the female prefect he’d heard laughing about Marietta Edgecombe’s transformation. She wound a curl of her hair around her finger as she considered him now. “We should have guards from all the Houses. That Smith bloke is an ally of yours, isn’t he?” She grimaced as if she’d bitten into something foul when she mentioned Zacharias. Harry wasn’t surprised. Zacharias seemed to strike most people that way.

“Yes, he is,” said Harry, relaxing a bit. “I think we should mix shifts. If you really must, have someone from another House working with the Ravenclaw guards, but also have Hufflepuffs working with Gryffindors, and Gryffindors working with Slytherins. If you really want to do this at all,” he added hopefully. He had the feeling that this would become a charade very soon. People had their marks and their OWLS and their NEWTS and the safety of their families—since there was a War on, after all—to worry about instead of him. Harry didn’t want them to neglect their lives for his.

“We know the Ravenclaws Malfoy meant,” said George. “We can get—“

“Their names for you,” Fred finished. “Pair of pretty—“

“Girls, Harry.” George winked. “Give Malfoy something to be jealous about. Keep him on his toes.”

Harry felt a bit of queasiness in his stomach at the thought of Draco being jealous. He’d had enough of that last Tuesday, Merlin knew. “Don’t tease him,” he said, facing the dungeons again. He was resigned, not surprised, when the twins adopted marching attitudes and kept pace with him and his Slytherins. “Please.”

“No more than he deserves, at least,” said George innocently.

And a Weasley twin's idea of deserving doesn't match anyone else's. Harry shook his head. He could only hope they wouldn't hurt Draco too badly, or that the Ravenclaw girls weren't really pretty.

They were, of course. Fred and George often joked, but not when telling the truth would serve their purposes better. They even made a point of escorting the Ravenclaws over to the Slytherin table that morning, when Harry was trying to enjoy the first normal breakfast he'd had in four days and pretend that he wasn't the focus of all eyes.

"Harry Potter," said George ceremoniously, using a Sonorus charm to project his voice to all parts of the Great Hall, "your first volunteer guard has asked me to introduce her. This is Padma Patil, twin sister of Parvati Patil."

Harry nodded to Padma. He knew her, vaguely. She, of course, looked almost exactly like Parvati, but there was a steady gleam to her eyes that reassured Harry she wouldn't be as giggly as her sister. She was pretty, though, with large dark eyes, dark skin, and a long sweep of flowing black hair that she kept braided with blue ribbons.

"And this," said Fred, planting himself in front of the other girl like a knight protecting his lady fair, "is the beauteous, the gracious, the munificent, the beneficent—"

He staggered as though the person standing behind him had hit him. He grinned, and stepped out of the way.

"Isabell Neelda," he finished.

Harry blinked when he saw Isabell. He had assumed she had to be at least casually connected with someone in another House to want to protect him, the way Padma was to Parvati, but he didn't know her. She was a sixth-year, so that wasn't surprising. She had light brown hair, blue eyes, and was beautiful more for her smile than anyone else.

She caught his startled gaze, and winked at him, turning her head to the side and putting a finger to her cheek. To anyone else, it probably looked like she was making a flirtatious gesture. Only Harry saw the

green-and-gold swirl of the tattoo that shone as the glamour she wore was brushed aside, and then vanished again as she swept her finger back the other way. He relaxed. She was Opalline, connected by blood to Paton.

"I've heard a lot about you, Harry," Isabell said, putting her hand out. Harry clasped it and shook. Draco made a sound from the side that was part grunt and part hiss. Harry withdrew his hand quickly, but Isabell didn't seem to take offense. "I'd like to be the first to apologize for the shameful behavior of my House. The moment Marietta gets out of the hospital wing, I am going to give her such a smack upside the head."

Harry turned his own head, and saw Draco's eyes take on an almost manic gleam. Harry had no idea whether his boyfriend had already taken revenge on Marietta, or whether Isabell had simply reminded him to, and had no intention of letting him think about it right now.

"Thank you, Isabell," he said, and nodded at Padma. "You, too."

Both Ravenclaws seemed to consider that enough invitation to sit down at the Slytherin table and start eating breakfast. The Weasley twins hovered around for a moment, grinning, but when Draco didn't oblige them by exploding into an immediate jealous fit, they pulled long faces and went back to eat with their fellow Gryffindors.

"Harry," Draco murmured into his ear as he leaned across the table to fetch the pancakes.

"What?" Harry asked.

"I don't think you'd do anything to make me jealous on purpose," said Draco. "I trust you. But you came near dying the other day. Pardon me if I'm a little protective, and going to watch every Ravenclaw who comes near you like a hawk for the next little while. It's just the way I am."

Harry relaxed. It could have been far worse.

Minerva sat calmly waiting for Aland and Julianne Rovenan. She had a Gryffindor scarf wound around her neck. She didn't need it; her

office was perfectly warm with the fire in the hearth, and it wasn't yet so cold outside that a Scottish witch required protection from the elements. But she had wanted to wear it, to have that rich tumble of gold and red around her when she faced the parents of the boy Severus had killed, so she did.

The Death Eater boy Severus had killed.

Minerva adjusted the scarf, and nodded. Yes. That made the difference. She was sorry for the parents who had lost their son; even an accidental death at Hogwarts was always anguish to report. And during the First War, when Light wizard after Light wizard had perished and she had had to bring the official letters carried by ravens to their children, Minerva had learned to know almost every variation of anguish and grief a face might wear. She had never got used to any of them.

But she had gone on bringing the letters and reporting the accidental deaths. Albus had relied on her to do that even then. So this was not a new task. Yes, this time the student had died at the hands of a teacher, and Minerva had had that teacher go right on teaching Potions. She didn't care. She would not run. She would not take even the diplomatic measures that Albus would have taken, canceling Potions classes or having someone else cover them until such time as "the matter was cleared up," to use a phrase he had favored.

She knew what the Rovenan parents intended to do to her. She would still not back down.

A knock sounded on the door, though the wards in the staircase had already let Minerva know they were coming. She called, "Please do come in, Mr. and Mrs. Rovenan."

No pause; they were probably too occupied by their grief to wonder how she had known for sure it was them. The door opened, and they entered. Minerva took the time to study them in the few moments before they sat down in their chairs and leaned forward to stare at her.

Aland Rovenan had gone to a private tutor instead of coming to Hogwarts, and Minerva knew little of him. A proud man, said some of her sources, but others claimed that he was only shy. Right now, though, looking into the pale, pinched face in which his son's blue eyes shone, Minerva had the feeling that he would have no trouble finding words. He had come to demand what he saw as justice for his dead child, and he would have it.

Julianne was a different matter. She'd been a Hogwarts student thirty years ago, and Minerva remembered her with some fondness. She'd been skilled in Transfiguration, and earned the most NEWTS ever in the subject at the time, though the record was broken a few years later. She had blond hair, and the yellow eyes common to some of the pureblooded Light families. She'd been in Gryffindor. The worst thing that Minerva remembered being true of her was her merciless nature when roused. She had a hawk's gaze, and a hawk's soul.

Julianne started, as Minerva had thought she would. "Headmistress," she said, respect like frost in her voice. "We have sent a letter to the board of governors. A representative of theirs will meet us here in a few minutes. I trust that you have owled them and given them the password to your office?"

"Of course," said Minerva politely. She could be polite. These were grieving parents. And since they had been kind enough to tell her what they intended to do beforehand, she'd had plenty of time to ponder and react. As she'd said in her letter, the governors were welcome in Hogwarts at any time. Two of them had walked through the school the day after Gilbert's death, seeing for themselves that there were no more Death Eaters in any of the other Houses.

"Enough, Julianne." That was Aland, leaning forward, his hands clutching the sides of his chair. "I want an explanation from this woman before we demand that they sack her. I want to know why the hell she didn't go to Ravenclaw Tower herself and preserve Gilbert's life." He closed his eyes, and a sob rose up in his throat. "From the reports I heard, she let several students try to take vengeance for what Gilbert did to the Potter boy, and then Severus Snape went after him and killed him. And it was all with your tacit permission,

Headmistress!" His eyes snapped open, and he stared at her. "I want to know where the hell you were."

"In my office," said Minerva quietly. "I had no idea that vengeance was planned, I assure you. I would say that the students were amply punished by what they encountered. As for Severus Snape—"

"We are asking that the board of governors sack him, too," said Julianne, and gave her a sharp, sweet smile. Minerva was reminded that she'd had a special hatred for Slytherins. "Just so that we're clear."

"Of course." Minerva showed her own teeth in return. Julianne was bird-like enough to rouse her own feline hunting instincts. "Severus Snape performed his duty to this school. You will know the story of his past. As such, he was aware of what the Dark Mark could do. Gilbert would have poisoned Hogwarts with the Mark if it kept burning. Professor Snape asked him to make it stop burning. Gilbert refused. So Professor Snape did what sometimes must be done in a time of war, and killed him."

She stopped abruptly, blinking at the image of the one her wards had told her was on the way up her stairs. Neither of the Rovenan parents appeared to have noticed her distraction, however. In fact, Aland took it as an excuse to jump back into the conversational fray.

"I don't believe my son was really a Death Eater," he said. "We haven't seen any proof."

Minerva raised her eyebrows. "Gilbert's body is in the hospital wing, under a preservation spell. I assumed you would wish to bury him in as perfect a condition as could be achieved. I will take you to see the corpse myself when our meeting is done, and you may see the Mark on his arm."

Aland hesitated. Julianne narrowed his eyes. "He cannot have been serious, then," she said. "Perhaps he used a spell to cast the Mark on himself in play. We know the reason that he used the spell against the Potter boy. He was upset because of what had happened to the girl he loves."

Minerva narrowed her eyes in turn. "Forgive me, Madam Rovenan," she said, deliberately using too high a title of respect, "but I was unaware that you considered young love a reason to try and kill another student."

"That was another exaggerated portion of the report that reached us, of course." Julianne clenched her fingers together like a hawk binding to a mouse. "We have heard people say that Gilbert used the Entrail-Expelling Curse. That cannot be true. We raised our son right. He would never turn to Dark Arts."

"And yet he did, in front of the Great Hall," said Minerva. "I can fetch all the witnesses that you like on that, Madam. But I see that our representative from the board of governors is here now, so perhaps we should suspend our conversation for a moment until he enters?"

Julianne inclined her head just as a sharp knock sounded on the door. Shaking her head over the ironies of fate, Minerva called, "Come in, sir."

Lucius Malfoy had a very predatory walk when he wanted to, and he had made his way to the center of the office before either of the Rovenan parents had turned to see him. He took Minerva's hand and bowed low over it, his eyes bright with a mixture of pleasure and dangerous amusement. "Headmistress, dear Lady," he murmured. "Always a breath of morning, to be in your presence."

Minerva held his gaze. She had faced Lucius Malfoy across several battlefields in the First War, had nearly died by his Killing Curse three times, and had nearly Transfigured him twice. And now they were allies. At least she thought she could live better in this violently changing world than Albus ever could have.

"Mr. Malfoy," she said. "If you would take your place?" She drew her wand and Transfigured one of the bookshelves into a chair for him. Lucius inclined his head in thanks, and sat down.

That was when Julianne Rovenan recovered enough of her breath to protest.

“Headmistress!” she all but squawked. “You cannot mean to have him here!”

“And why not?” Lucius cocked his head to the side and regarded the woman quizzically. “Much as I am sorry for your loss, Mrs. Rovenan, I hardly think that you can object to me on the grounds of my not having lost a child.”

“Not that! Do you deny that your son is Harry Potter’s boyfriend, and that your presence here is therefore a conflict of interest?” Julianne had stood. She had a gleam in her eyes that said she was soaring in for the kill. Minerva stifled a groan. Julianne did get like this.

“I don’t really think it’s a conflict of interest, Mrs. Rovenan.” Lucius continued with the thoughtful frown. “After all, we are not here to try and punish my son, or Harry Potter. We are here to determine whether Headmistress McGonagall and Professor Severus Snape should be retained in their present positions, or sacked. The governors agreed to send me because I once knew Severus Snape, and should be able to tell if he is lying or not.” He lightly touched his left arm. “Also, it was understood that you had some questions about whether the Dark Mark on your son’s body is, in fact, the true one. I can see why you would not want to trust Professor Snape’s word on the matter. After all, he was not Gilbert’s Head of House, nor his friend. I assure you, I can identify it. I, myself, am Marked.”

“A servant of You-Know-Who, then.” Aland was staring at Lucius, his face white with an emotion Minerva thought was loathing, this time.

“Never willingly,” said Lucius at once, enough pride in his voice for five Rovenan parents. “I was under the Imperius Curse at the time, and reeling from the death of my father. I was captured, held, and used against my will. I escaped Azkaban by testifying against my former comrades, that is true, but most of them had served willingly. I never did.”

Liar, Minerva thought, staring at Lucius. He has too strong a will to ever surrender to being a servant.

“We still cannot trust your word,” Julianne insisted.

“And why not?” Lucius turned a wounded look on her.

“You are a Dark wizard!” Julianne flung those words at him as if daring him to deny them.

Lucius’s eyes lost their innocence for the first time. “I am also a pureblood back to the time of the Norman Conquest,” he said. “I challenge you to find one shred of dishonor according to the pureblood rituals in my family history. You will find none.” He rose to his feet. “If you really wish me gone, I will go. Of course, the board will have to send someone other than the governor you requested. It seems that he is married to your sister. Now, that would be a conflict of interest.”

Julianne turned her head away. Aland said, abruptly, “We want justice for Gilbert. That’s all. If he really did use the Entrail-Expelling Curse, if he really was a Death Eater, then—then I want to know.” His voice shook, but steadied when Minerva looked at him. “I want to see his body.”

Minerva nodded. “But we must wait until the board sends someone other than Mr. Malfoy to conduct the investigation.”

“If he can identify the Dark Mark, then I want him,” said Aland.

“Aland!” Julianne turned towards her husband.

“No, Julianne.” Aland was shivering like a stake in a high wind, but he stood and put one arm around her shoulders. “I—we have to know, don’t we? I want to know. Either they’re all terribly mistaken about Gilbert, and then we can sack a Professor who would kill a student for no good reason at all and make Hogwarts safer for the rest of the children here. Or they’re telling the truth, and there are horrible things about him we never knew. I want to know what those are. I want to know my son.”

Julianne leaned into her husband, and said nothing. Minerva wondered how much of her feral intensity had been a mask to hide the tear-blasted woman within.

Aland looked at Lucius and Minerva over his wife's head, and nodded. "I think we're ready to see Gilbert's body now."

Afterwards, after the parents had seen their son's body and suffered the painful shock of knowing that almost everything they'd believed about him was wrong, after the tears and the recriminations and the calm responses and the apologies for the recriminations, after the Rovenans had gone away shocked into silence but promising to talk to the newspapers about what had really happened, Lucius walked back to the dungeons with Severus.

He didn't know why. Severus had simply looked at him, and Lucius had recognized the look in his eyes that he usually got before a Death Eater raid. So he'd made his excuses to the Headmistress about taking tea in her office, and walked back into dungeons that still felt like home to him, even though he'd gone to Hogwarts half a lifetime ago.

Severus led him straight to his offices, a motion that made Lucius raise his eyebrows. At least the man had sense enough not to let him hear his password. Lucius really would have had to punish him if he'd been enough of an idiot for that.

Not that the man was an idiot, of course, not with the way he'd handled Gilbert Rovenan—publicly, asking him to stop, just the way calculated to raise the least amount of fuss. Lucius was sure that Severus had done it for just the reasons the Headmistress indicated, to stop the school from being poisoned. He was also sure that Severus hadn't been without pleasure in the deed, given what the boy had done to Harry.

Lucius still wanted to snarl when he thought about it. If the professors hadn't already checked their Houses for more Marked students, he would have done it himself. To have something like that happen to their young vates in the middle of all Hogwarts's wards and

protections was unthinkable. And then to have his parents doubt that he'd been a Death Eater, and used a Dark curse!

Sometimes, the sheer thickness of Light wizards made Lucius repine that he'd turned from Voldemort. Of course, with Harry around, the Light wizards shut up and did as they were told. It was the only thing that made Lucius tolerate having them as part of the alliance.

"What did you want me to see?" he asked, once they were fully inside the office. He didn't doubt that Severus had brought him here to see something. Otherwise, he could have cast spells that wouldn't allow them to be overhead and told him the truth elsewhere in Hogwarts. Severus had always been good at that kind of thing.

"This." Severus was already turning around, a Pensieve in his hands. Lucius took a wary step closer, his hand on his wand. He didn't really think that Severus would turn on him, but one survived as a Dark wizard and a Slytherin by trusting one's paranoia, and he knew all sorts of spells that could be cast with a Pensieve. The Dark Lord had once kept a prisoner alive for seventeen days with one.

"It won't hurt you, Lucius," said Severus, catching on to his caution then and giving him an exasperated look. "Draco would never forgive me if anything happened to you, and what Draco doesn't forgive, neither does Harry."

Slightly reassured, Lucius still waited for Severus to put the Pensieve down and dip his head below the surface before he followed.

He found himself in Ravenclaw Tower while Severus asked Gilbert Rovenan to lower his wand. He stood on the floor, though, a distance from the battle, and he'd already heard Severus describe it, so there must be some other reason he was there. He looked around.

And then he felt it. He stiffened. There was a drifting mist in the air, coiling within the minds of everyone around them, carrying powerful Light magic and a whispering compulsion. Lucius focused on the whispers, willing them into clarity, and thought he heard Harry Potter before Severus, standing beside him, distracted him.

“I’ve been able to bring them that close,” he said. He had his back turned to the battle, as if he couldn’t bear to watch himself kill the boy again. Lucius doubted that, of course. Probably, there was nothing very interesting in a battle he’d had to relive several times. “Close enough to know that it’s a spell trained on Harry. But I don’t know much else about it.”

Lucius tried, as best he could, to examine the state of his own mind. He couldn’t discover much, but he appeared to be free of the spell. That didn’t reassure him. “Why haven’t you told anyone else?”

Snape snarled. “I have tried. The information slides from their minds the moment I speak of it. The spell can defend itself, Lucius. I think I only noticed it on Wednesday because I was specifically searching for signs that someone was about to try Dark Arts with the Mark burning, and then I trapped the memory in an Occlumency pool. We can discuss the thing, here. Outside the Pensieve, I retain the memory, but I am a trained Occlumens. No one else seems to.”

Lucius held up a hand, his eyes closing sharply. “Wait. Wait.”

Severus, to his credit, waited. Lucius was not sure that he could have done the same thing, if someone else had told him that much and no more. He dived into the depths of his memory, seeking out what he’d heard one day in a sleepy, dozy History of Magic classroom, when he’d forced himself to stay awake throughout the lecture to win a bet with one of his yearmates.

There are Light spells that affect the mind and influence the perceptions, that are capable, for example, of converting one’s perceptions of a particular person into unfavorable ones—that is, ones that will hinder his actions and prevent him from doing whatever it is that you wish him to do. They are rarely used. For one thing, they require an enormous amount of power, and they would drain even most Lords and Ladies of Light. For a second, they are considered as immoral, skirting the edges of Dark Arts, a weapon to be raised only in war, if then. And for a third, they are subtle, and take a long time to work, time which may drain the wizard or witch fueling them, and they have odd limitations. They cannot cross water, for example.

Lucius remembered no more, because he had fallen asleep, but those words had entered his mind and burned there with peculiar intensity. His mind had been on the edge of dreaming, and everything seemed more real then, as his brain strove to distinguish between dream and waking. At any rate, he was sure that his information was correct, and that this was what the spell was.

And he was sure that only one Light wizard in Britain at the moment would have the strength and the motivation to use such a spell.

“Dumbledore,” he spat, opening his eyes.

Severus nodded tightly. “So I assumed. And I assume that it is responsible for the recent spate of attacks on Harry, both in the Prophet and in the school. But how to spread the word of it, when you will lose the memory the moment you step out of the Pensieve and I cannot talk of it to anyone?”

“Can you write it down?”

Snape shrugged. “I tried that, too, but though I have seen my reader’s eyes widen, they forget about it the moment they look away from the parchment.”

Lucius cursed. “Then I think we must have our vates break the compulsion,” he said. “Bring him into the Pensieve, show him what is happening, and ask him to snap the web.” He narrowed his eyes at Severus, struck with a sudden thought. “In fact, why haven’t you done that already?”

Severus’s hesitation revealed the reason. Lucius rolled his eyes. “I know you care for the boy,” he said. “So do we all. But I assure you, he would not thank you for trying to relieve him of this ‘stress.’ He would wish to be rid of it, because it influences others.”

“I suppose I needed someone else to say it.” Severus shrugged. “Do you think you will recover the memory of this once the spell is broken?”

"I hope so, but I cannot be certain," said Lucius. "At the least, you should be able to speak and write of the spell then, and you will convince others if you ask them to compare their feelings about Harry then to the feelings they had about him for the last few months." His mind was racking and clicking along like the Hogwarts Express. "Doesn't Harry have a contact in Rita Skeeter?"

Severus's face drew down in a sneer. "That woman—"

"Is still a better reporter than any other on the Prophet, these days," Lucius cut in. "Ask him to contact her. Ask her to release an exclusive story on the effects of Dumbledore's spell, with proof on how he broke it. Not that Prophet readers need the truth. The very suggestion of this will muddy the waters."

"His parents' trial is in only a few weeks," Snape warned with a light snarl. "I would not want to put—"

"More stress on him." Lucius tossed his head impatiently. "It is likely that he will never have to live through a period of stress this intense in the next year. I would rather eliminate any chance of a Light Lord gaining control over the minds of his allies, and Harry himself, than see his parents or that Light Lord go free because of an undetected spell and your tender sensibilities, Severus."

"You do not understand what he is putting himself through—"

"I understand that he is stronger than you think," said Lucius. He locked eyes with his old comrade, and didn't back down. "Ask others if I cannot convince you. Narcissa, Hawthorn, Regulus. And he is vates. This is within his rights, his responsibilities, his duties as one who bears that name. He will do it, and he will do it eagerly."

Severus bowed his head. Lucius smirked at him, and then stepped back and out of the Pensieve.

He gripped his thoughts as he did so, trying to retain the memory of Dumbledore's spell. Of course, the man had been responsible for the wards of Hogwarts, but it seemed he had never bothered to set one that would detect Death Eaters in the school. Or perhaps the

Headmistress had never bothered to set one. Lucius would speak to her about that before he left. He would offer his own Dark Mark as a test subject, if she needed something to anchor the ward to.

Wasn't I thinking about something else?

He shook his head, and left Severus's office without a backward glance. He did know that they'd been talking about Harry, and he'd said the boy was stronger than Severus thought.

And he is. Stronger than anyone else I have ever known. He survives everything, and that is what must be done before one can do anything else.

Harry saw doom fall with the Daily Prophet on Monday morning.

The owls had to circle the room before they got to the Slytherin table. That meant the other tables got their newspapers first. One by one, Harry saw smiles wither and die on their faces, and then they turned their heads and locked their eyes on him. Shock and horror and condemnation made their expressions change.

Harry closed his eyes when Draco received his newspaper. He waited until the sharp noise that said Draco had shaken it out, and then he gazed bleakly at the front page.

There was a photograph of himself, close and exceptionally clear. As Harry watched, he held up an Augurey chick, a greenish-black bird that was struggling awkwardly in his hand. He gave the camera a twisted sneer, and then smashed the chick's head open with a stone, and shocking violence.

Harry looked at the headline. The byline, of course, was Argus Veritaserum's; that was not surprising. It was the headline that did the damage.

HARRY POTTER: VATES OR MURDERER OF MAGICAL CREATURES?

Anonymous witnesses speak out about the horror of 'Potter Revels'

Harry swallowed his sickness, and clenched his hand on the edge of the table. He knew this wasn't true, of course not, but he knew what the article would say before reading it. It would claim that this supposed killing had happened during the time he was in hospital, only pretending to be recovering from the Entrail-Expelling Curse. It would hint darkly that he killed innocent and useful magical creatures, that his ambitions as vates were just a cover, and that there was a reason no one saw Dementors or unicorns any more. It would include many tantalizing details about how the murders had happened.

It would not be believed, not by everyone. But in the tense and heated atmosphere that had led to some members of Ravenclaw House who were not Death Eaters attacking him, which had led to the Veritaserum articles in the first place, Harry feared that the picture and the articles would do their work. Some people really would swallow it whole, and others would believe because they wanted to or it was convenient to do so.

He could find nothing else to think of for long moments as he watched "himself" smash Augurey after Augurey, until he felt a hand on his shoulder and Snape murmured in his ear, "Harry, come with me immediately."

Numbly, Harry climbed to his feet and followed, wondering what the magical creatures would believe, wondering how many wizards would turn against him, and praying that he could somehow wake up from this dream and have it not be real.

And underneath all that, burning and climbing like a dragon tunneling to the surface, was fury.

How dare they. How dare they hurt those I am supposed to protect.

Chapter Thirty-Six: The Will of Water

Harry only became aware of the guards following him when Snape tried to shut his office door in their faces. That caused a loud, and immediate, protest from Draco, Isabell, and Hannah Abbott. They hushed when Harry turned around and met their gazes, too. Harry suspected that his rage was shining through his eyes.

"I won't be long," he said softly. Whatever Snape wanted him for, it couldn't be long. Breakfast would be over in half an hour, and then classes began, including Potions. "Stay there."

None of them objected, though Draco stared a bit too long. Harry didn't know why, and didn't try to figure it out. He shut the door behind himself, and turned to see Snape placing a Pensieve on a low table Transfigured from one of the chairs that usually occupied the office. Old wariness made Harry hesitate before he walked up to it, but then he shook his head and moved forward.

"What memories does this hold?" he asked.

"The battle at Ravenclaw Tower, and what I did to stop Rovenan," said Snape. "But, more than that, it holds the memory of a spell I sensed that night." He paused, as if waiting for something, then made a small noise of frustration. "It is not easy to explain outside the Pensieve. It will be easier once you have put your head into it." He lowered his own before Harry could protest that he didn't like Pensieves and had never seen anything attractive in them. Grumbling, Harry stepped around to the other side of the dish and followed.

He still wanted to do something about Argus Veritaserum and the person who had caused the Augurey chicks to be murdered. But perhaps this was important, too. The way Snape had sailed up to him argued that it was.

Time and space flipped around him, and then he stood in the Ravenclaw common room, a place he had visited a few times when he was helping Luna to make progress in her classes in her second year, after she'd been paralyzed for most of her first. He heard and felt magic blazing from above, foul heaviness rather like Voldemort's

wandless power in the graveyard. He forced himself to ignore it, and concentrate on the air around them, between the many staring faces and open mouths of the Ravenclaws.

“You feel it?” Snape, the present-time one standing behind him and not the one on the landing pleading with Rovenan, asked.

Harry frowned. There was a spell there, wasn’t there? Its form was odd. It was a boiling mist, foaming as if it objected to the attention of their minds. Whispers filled it. Harry cocked his ears, stripping away all the other distractions to focus on just one part of his hearing the way his mother had taught him, and heard his own name, repeated over and over and over again.

He shook his head. “Why would someone want to cast a spell that fills the room with my name repeated over and over?” he asked Snape.

Snape snarled. “That is not its purpose, Harry. I could not tell you outside the Pensieve, because I have attempted to tell several people over the past week—Minerva, you, even Lucius when he came to settle the matter of Rovenan’s parents—and the spell has eaten your memories. You understand me well enough when we’re conversing, but your attention wanders in a few moments, and then you’ve forgotten about it again. The spell is subtle, and contains its own defense mechanism.”

Harry shut his eyes, to close off the distraction of sight as well, and listened again. There was something before his name in each repetition of the spell. It was the incantation that had created it, Harry realized abruptly. After several moments of listening, he thought he had all the words.

Converto intellegentiam de Harry Potter. Converto animadversionem ab intellegentia.

Several possible translations of the spell flashed through his head, but Harry rejected most of them; the spell wasn’t focused on him, for one thing, which would argue against an interpretation like the

incantation lowering his intelligence. He found one that fit after a few moments.

I change the perception of Harry Potter. I change the good perception to an unfavorable one.

Harry's eyes blazed open. He felt the rage in him alter direction. He was still angry about Argus Veritaserum and the Augurey chicks, but those were targets truly beyond his wrath for the moment; he still didn't know who Veritaserum was. But he knew who must have cast a spell like this, so closely allied to compulsion, so mental, so subtle rather than directly confrontational in the way that Voldemort would have gone for.

Dumbledore.

Harry snarled under his breath and turned to look up at Snape. "How far do you think this spell extends?" he asked, voice so furious that he barely recognized it himself. "Just through Hogwarts?"

Snape shook his head. "Lucius was able to tell me something of its nature yesterday, while he was in the Pensieve and the spell did not steal his memories of itself. I did research last night. The only thing that stops this spell, other than the power and perception of the witch or wizard who uses it, is salt water. I think we're looking at a spell that occupies the whole of England, Scotland, and Wales." He paused. "You have made a small net of safety in the middle of that, Harry."

"Oh?" Harry's thoughts roared back across the past months, taking in the attacks of the Ravenclaws and the weeping of Madam Shiverwood and the sudden madness of Auror Mallory, and casting them into a new light. "Why do you say that?"

"I do not seem to have been affected, other than losing my memories of the spell whenever I started to catch on," said Snape. "Neither does Draco. I can imagine ways in which this spell could have twisted several of his perceptions. He would never consent to remain on the other side of that door if he was overprotective about you to the point of hindering your progress, for example. He could easily have hurt

and killed the people who hurt you. But the only one he truly struck at was Whitecheek, and that happened in the midst of battle.”

Harry frowned. “But that doesn’t make sense. Why would Dumbledore want to leave the people who supported me alone? He might have a hard time changing their behavior without my thinking there was something going on, but if the spell really does protect itself, except in the Pensieve—“

“That is not what I mean,” said Snape. “You have made a career of unbinding compulsions wherever you find them, Harry. I think that your mind saw this net, or sensed it, and unbound it from those you love. Or perhaps you had already laid the protection in place.” He stepped forward and put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “You told me once that you want everyone free to make their own decisions as much as possible, uninfluenced by Lords or fear or powerful magic.”

Harry could feel himself scowling. “But that means everyone. Not just people I love, or trust, or feel protective of, or however this defense truly works.”

Snape sighed. “Then I think Lucius was right, and you must be prevailed on to break the spell.”

Harry wondered how, if he would lose the memories the moment he left the Pensieve, but then dismissed the question. He would just do it from within the Pensieve, then. He would do whatever he must to snap this compulsion and give everyone their minds back.

“Did your research tell you how the spell was meant to be broken?” he asked, but wasn’t surprised when Snape shook his head.

“No. It suggested that, most of the time, it breaks when the wizard or witch powering it collapses. Most people cannot take the stretch in perceptions that it brings on, multiplying one’s eyes and emotions endlessly, until one can see through all the minds under siege if one chooses.”

“Then that means Dumbledore knows what we’ve been doing.” Harry suffered a faint tremor of unease, and then pushed it away again.

Caution had its place, and it was in the planning how to break the spell, not in worry over what would happen afterwards. Now was the time for courage. “Very well, then. We’ll keep that in mind when we deal with him. Do you think he’s behind the reason that the wizarding public has been so hostile to me?”

“Very likely,” Snape agreed. “And the reason why the articles were received at all. I know the Prophet would normally get tired of accepting anonymous articles so frequently. The spell seems to have increased their antipathy towards you. Skeeter’s articles rarely appear anymore.”

Harry had noticed, but had assumed it was because Skeeter was getting tired of defending him. He gave an absent nod. “So part of this is false, too. I can’t depend on anchoring my unweaving of the spell on the difference between many people’s notions of true and false. They’ll consider their memories of the past few months as being as accurate and true as their memories before the spell began, and we have no way of knowing when Dumbledore began the spell, anyway.”

“Anchoring your unweaving of the spell—“

“Dumbledore’s like a spider,” Harry explained, frowning at the wide-eyed Ravenclaws in the Pensieve memory and wondering how many of them would have opposed him or thought of him at all without the spell. “He’s weaving from point to point. He can’t anchor the web on nothing, don’t you see? He chose to alter perceptions of me, not create them. He had to have some emotion in the person’s mind to work with, no matter how small it was. And now I have to have something to anchor my unweaving of the spell with. I don’t think I can just follow the pattern of his spell, because I don’t know those other minds like I know yours, or Draco’s. I might alter something that was original to them.”

“I must admit that I know very little of magic like this, Harry.” Snape’s voice was subdued. “I am an Occlumens and a Legilimens, but I work, at most, with one other mind, or with presences in someone else’s mind. I am not sure what to advise you to do with this.”

"I'll figure it out," said Harry darkly. He could feel the burning in him change its focus. Now it was urgency, and not merely anger. He wanted that web unbound. It was going. Its very existence was intolerable to him, since it had acted against other people's wills and choices. "I'll have to think it through a bit, and probably stay in the Pensieve until I do, but I'll figure it out."

"Can I help?"

Harry started, and turned. Argutus was crawling towards him through the memory, twisting his head in interest to look up at the scared Ravenclaws. "I have been here before, but not with so many people," he announced, twining around Harry's left leg, his left hip, and then his left arm. "And this feels like something out of the past. This is not a natural place, is it?" He didn't sound offended, but fascinated.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "You can tell the difference between the present and the past?"

Argutus cocked his head to look back at his own milk-smooth scales. "And the future. I am an Omen snake, after all."

Harry stared hard at him, and saw colors swarming on the scales, dancing and trying to form a vision. He doubted that Argutus was old enough yet to tell him what they meant, so he waited, gazing at them and stroking Argutus's head. Snape waited with him, probably thinking he was conversing with Argutus on matters of deepest importance and needed to be left alone.

The colors altered fitfully, fretfully, and finally slammed into a maze of scarlet and gold, as if they'd found a form that suited them. Harry squinted, but still could not tell what shape the scarlet and gold might take. The Gryffindor lion, a Gryffindor banner? Was Argutus telling him that he needed the help of the Headmistress, or perhaps his twin? Or was he just trying to say that Harry would be involved in breaking a Gryffindor's spell?

That's the problem with Divination, Harry reflected in frustration, thinking of Trelawney's prophecy in his third year. Never enough details when you need them to really help with anything.

But if he could force no interpretation upon the hues, then he was at least free to let his mind roam and pick an association with them. Harry tried to slow his breathing, thinking of things that were red and gold. Gryffindor colors, leaves when they turned, fire—

Fawkes!

Harry clenched his hand, causing Argutus to hiss in displeasure as Harry quit petting him. “Argutus?” he asked, bending towards the Omen snake to give him the task before he could sulk. As long as he thought he was doing something important, Argutus would bustle. “Can you get out of the Pensieve and then bring the phoenix here, without alerting anyone to what you’re doing?”

Argutus turned his head slyly sideways. “Of course I can,” he said. “No one knows as many tunnels in the stone as I do. And he is asleep in your den at this time of the morning. But I don’t know why I should. After all, you haven’t spent much time lately with me, and I don’t like the phoenix. He has the bad habit of shrinking and growing when he should stay the same size all the time.”

Harry managed a smile, in spite of everything. Argutus wanted to be coaxed. In the midst of so much strangeness, a spell that had influenced most everyone Harry knew without their even being aware of it, it was good to find at least one being who acted normally.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You’re the cleverest, dearest snake that ever was, Argutus. Your name means ‘clear,’ but it’s more than that. You’re a good omen all by yourself, never mind that you’re an Omen snake. Your eyes see more clearly than anyone else’s in the school. You discover all the really interesting things. But you’ve got courage, too, to survive those pain spells without a murmur of complaint, and nobody is as loyal as you are.” He felt an inspiration strike him and sink its teeth into his brain. Argutus had been fascinated by the differences between the Houses—it was the reason he spent so much time wandering in the Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor common rooms—and had insisted on hearing as much of the history of Hogwarts as Harry thought he could understand. “In fact, you’re the perfect blend of all four Houses.”

Argutus gave a quick little hiss Harry hadn't known he could utter; he supposed it was the closest a snake could come to a purr. "I go," he said, and slid down from Harry's arm in the direction of the "back" of the memory. Harry supposed he had got in in the first place by sliding over the Pensieve rim. "I cannot let you down, not when I am that cunning and clever and brave and loyal."

He slithered off, and Snape demanded at once, "Do you really think the Omen snake can help you, Harry?"

Harry let out a little breath. "His scales showed a vision of fire. I think Fawkes can help me, yes."

"Why?" Snape looked as if he were reconsidering ever showing Harry this. Harry knew why. Snape's eyes had spoken it all through the conversation in which he told Harry about Rovenan, and his part in killing him. There was a new kind of protectiveness to his gaze, a new hesitancy about involving Harry in efforts to cure evil or fight spells like this one. "Are you sure you aren't grasping at straws?"

"I might be," Harry admitted. "Not even the prophecies of an Omen snake are clear, after all, at least until he learns to interpret them. But Fawkes is those colors he was showing, and he was Dumbledore's phoenix. I think he knows his mind as well as anyone else alive. You said that the spell contains a large part of Dumbledore's own perception. I hope to be able to detangle what's him and what's the thoughts of the people I'm fighting for that way."

Snape's frown was deep. "That does not sound easy."

"It probably won't be." Harry kept his voice light.

"Why must you be the one to do this?" Snape whispered. "Lucius said that you would be, and he was right, damn him. But can you not rest, and hand the reins over to someone else? I might be able to solve the problem eventually, through dedicated study of Occlumency and Legilimency."

Harry gave him an incredulous look. "What with your duties as Potions Master and Head of Slytherin and Deputy Headmaster? No, sir. And the problem would grow worse in the meantime. I know your methods. With all due respect, sir, you would spend months on this, because you wouldn't want to do something wrong. Sometimes you simply have to say fuck caution."

"Spoken like a Gryffindor," said Snape, though his words lacked malice.

"Spoken like an angry vates," said Harry. "And there's the other part of your answer, sir. I have to do this because no one else can. Dumbledore might have the power, but he sure as fuck doesn't have the motivation."

"Does your language always get fouler when you are angry?" Snape asked.

"You mean you haven't noticed that by now, sir?" Harry prowled in circles, absently avoiding the Ravenclaws, who were clutching defensively at their left arms as Snape cut their sleeves off. "Yes, it does. And I am very angry. He had no right to do this. It isn't—it isn't even limited to the people I'm protecting." Harry shook his head, wondering how he could explain it. The explanation would both reassure Snape and enable Harry to put his thoughts into some kind of order, so he wanted to make the effort. "Everyone deserves that capacity to make their own choices, without being pushed in one direction or another. I know I can't stop some of the pushing, like parents telling their children to go to bed at a certain time or else, but no one should ever have to suffer from magical coercion. And some of them will make bad choices, like following Voldemort, but that's still what they decided on. But I can't just force freedom on people, because what if they don't want it? That's why I'm almost grateful to Dumbledore for handing me this. It's not like freeing house elves, where I'll have to talk wizards into agreeing." Harry grimaced slightly at the thought of what a nightmare that would be. "It's a clear-cut situation. I'm not changing their minds, just handing them back their capacity to make their own decisions."

“Why?” Snape whispered. Harry knew he wasn’t asking why that was a good thing—how could he, when he bore the Dark Mark on his arm and had fought so long and hard to get free of what it meant?—but why Harry was so deeply committed to this, in particular.

Harry stretched out his hand, and let a shimmer of flame run up his arm. “I’ve got all this magic. What else would I use it for?”

Snape shook his head, eyes amused, and started to reply, but just then the air around them shone with subtle fire, and Fawkes arrived on Harry’s shoulder with a croon. Argutus slithered through the common room a moment later.

“He flew ahead of me,” said Argutus. “Tell him to stop doing that.”

Harry stroked Fawkes’s wing feathers, and ignored Snape’s mutters about how the phoenix had come to be here. Harry thought Fawkes could go anywhere he wanted, and probably ignored what wizards thought of as “rules” in doing so. “I need your help,” he said softly. “Dumbledore’s extended a spell over England, Scotland, and Wales. I want to break it. It compels people to change their minds about me. The problem is that it’s hard to tell where his mind begins and their thoughts end, and we can’t do it outside the Pensieve, or we’ll lose our memories. Can you help me?”

Fawkes uttered a deep sound Harry hadn’t heard before, like the crash of falling waters. Then he rose from Harry’s shoulder, hovering just above it, so that his tail feathers and no more brushed against the side of Harry’s neck. He shut his eyes, and his song burst forth.

Harry had thought he’d heard all his friend’s songs—the mourning one, the coaxing one that told other magical creatures of the coming of a new vates, the joyous one with which he sometimes greeted sunrise, the wild one that he’d sung as he flew above the Forbidden Forest. But this was a new one. It was barely a melody, since it combined so many different sounds. Harry could hear a mutter of voices, only some of them singing. They babbled and rushed past him, and then he found himself swept up in them.

The Pensieve memory tore and whirled away. Harry had only a moment to worry about whether that would mean he would lose his memories of the spell and what he was doing with it, because he found himself dancing through flames.

Pattern after pattern took fire, nets and rounds and wheels of it, spreading in every direction. Harry stared, and began to see the threads that were there before they burned, ash-black strands of thought and emotion and memory. Fawkes's voice ascended, and more and more of the webs exploded into white and gold and orange and blue.

No, there was only some blue, Harry realized abruptly. That was the color that expanded and throbbed on the most tangled web, the one that raced through and under everything else. Harry's eyes narrowed, and his heart began to beat to the same harsh rhythm as those flames did.

That's Dumbledore's web. Fawkes is marking it out for me, in the best way he knows how.

He felt a sharp tug on his left arm, and looked down to see Argutus coiling there, his weight deliberate. He lifted his head and extended his tongue to taste the scent of the fire, not looking at all put out. "I don't want to be left behind," he explained.

Harry was not at all sure that the snake would be able to keep up in this strange neverland of fire and Pensieve memory and phoenix song, but he wouldn't discourage him from coming, either. There had lately been enough discouragement of ambitions and choices and freedom. He rested his hand on the Omen snake and reached out towards the blue flames that marked Dumbledore's web.

At first, he didn't know what to do. If he put out the flames, then he might kill Dumbledore's influence over anyone else, but he might also permanently damage Dumbledore's mind. There was part of him that whispered that would be no bad thing. Who cared if the Light Lord was found drooling in his Still-Beetle confinement when they came to escort him to the trial?

But Harry did. He cared. He had not received Dumbledore's permission to damage his mind. He didn't need his permission to unbraided his influence, since that was something he had done that had hurt others. But Harry had no reason to bat him back into his own mind and wreck all that he was.

The key, as always, proved to be imagination. What Harry thought of the webs as, how he conceived them, was often as important as what he actually did to be rid of them. He closed his eyes, and located himself in Fawkes's song, the song of falling waters.

Water opposes fire, said a voice so old that it seemed to be a natural truth of the world, not one that Harry had located inside himself.

He thought of water. The sea at the Northumberland beach came to him, as perhaps it always would, first of all, the endless hush of waves and the expanses of stone-gray ocean. Then he imagined the siren's pool at Woodhouse, the lush, clear liquid, made, he was sure, to mimic the siren's natural environment. Then it was the lake at Hogwarts, shifting and cloudy, the weeds blossoming to hide the truths of the water and the dangers within it.

Water standing became water falling, rain singing down, the smell of dampness in the dungeons that always increased when a storm was in the offing. Rain was probably falling right now; Harry had seen a tinge of gray in the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall this morning. Rain was a part of autumn, of spring, of Britain and of Ireland, drizzle and wetness and sudden heaviness in clothing and limbs.

Water falling became water flowing, braids of rivers threading all over the islands, ending in the sea, or beginning in it, if one looked at it another way, breathing out union, breathing out connection, ripple and spread and link and drown.

Harry wound the imaginings together inside him, and then braided them up with the remnant of his anger. The Augurey's cry signaled rain, and there were several Augurey chicks who would never cry to herald a storm, thanks to their murder by the person posing as him. Harry imagined rain falling, lonely for the black-green bird's cry, and

he imagined people daring to murder the chicks and publish the articles and believe them at all because of Dumbledore's spell, and he pushed the water out of himself.

He opened his eyes and saw the cascades twining down the web's burning strands, falling with imagined gravity and not against it—it was important that the image be as natural as possible—drowning the fire as it went. Fawkes's song wound between the waters all the while, thunderous as a cascade. This was a song of justice, of stern and regretted but necessary action. Fawkes did not like getting rid of his own flames, but in this case, the flames he was getting rid of were not natural, should not have been here, should have stayed safely ensconced in Dumbledore's head. Fire had to yield to the will of water.

Harry poured it all out of himself, and saw the strands cool and stop burning, turning to ash. He wondered what the thoughts of those under Dumbledore's spell would feel like at the moment. Would they experience a certain lightness, wondering where the weight on their emotions had gone? Or would they think of him and not know why? Or would they feel nothing at all until the web was snapped completely?

Harry leaned forward and breathed on the fragile, ashy strands of the web, expecting them to blow apart.

Nothing happened.

Harry frowned, and glanced up at Fawkes, wondering what he should do. The phoenix uttered a confused note, then went back to singing the song of stern justice so that the ash-web couldn't creep away and mingle with the others. But that warble was enough to confirm to Harry that the phoenix didn't know what he should do any more than he did.

He gnawed his lip for a moment, and tried to recall what he knew of Dumbledore. He must have pushed an enormous amount of his magic into this. He would have given all he had, heart and soul and mind. That had been why Fawkes could locate his influence at all, because so much of the Headmaster himself was present.

What was the heart of Dumbledore?

And then Harry knew. His smile wasn't happy as he stepped forward, gently shifting the weight of Argutus back to his shoulder. He didn't really like understanding the former Headmaster any more than he had liked understanding Voldemort. But he wasn't foolish enough to ignore his understanding, either.

The heart of Dumbledore was sacrifice.

Harry touched the stump of his left wrist to the ash-web.

He could feel the spell scream, rather than hear it, a low vibration that traveled through his body. Argutus gave a surprised hiss. "Did a tree fall?" he asked, but then became absorbed, as Harry was, in watching the web unravel.

It began from the inside and traced outward, following the general spiral shape. Numerous small strands, binding the spell's influence to the thoughts and emotions of many different people, puffed apart and were gone, dissipating into floating clouds of black dust. Harry watched as the larger structures slumped and melted into meaninglessness, and he felt joy throbbing in his chest like a second heartbeat.

And satisfied rage, too. Strange that the ending of the web doesn't seem to have ended my anger, Harry thought. Even stranger that I don't want it to. I want to find out who killed those magical creatures and make them pay.

The web whirled around once and blew away. Harry laughed, and looked down as he felt Argutus lift his head and test the air with a tongue.

"Do you do that all the time?" he asked.

"Quite a bit of the time," said Harry.

"I'm so glad that I chose you as a friend," said Argutus happily. "That was fascinating. I can't wait until the next time we get to do that."

Fawkes gave an indignant warble as he settled on Harry's shoulder, and in Harry's mind appeared a vision of the phoenix and Harry shining with light, while Argutus lounged behind them, a dim shadow. He had helped with dismissing Dumbledore's web, the vision said; Argutus had done absolutely nothing.

Harry stroked the phoenix and the Omen snake in turn, and then opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the Pensieve memory around them, replaying, this time somewhere near the middle of Snape's battle with Rovenan. The second thing he saw was Snape staring at him.

There was an awe in his eyes that Harry didn't think he'd ever seen before. Of course, he thought, Snape had never been this close to the breaking of a web, while Draco had shared the freeing of the centaurs and the unicorns and the Many with him. And if he'd seen a tenth part of what Harry and Fawkes had done, Harry couldn't blame him for feeling awed. He was feeling rather smug and pleased himself.

"So that's gone," he said confidently.

Snape nodded, slowly. Then he straightened, as if thinking it remiss of a guardian to listen to what his charge said, and announced, "I rather think the Headmistress will cancel classes for today, to give people time to deal with the sudden change."

"Good," said Harry, with a shrug. "I think people need the recovery time. And I need to contact the Ministry, and the Daily Prophet." If Skeeter doesn't know who Argus Veritaserum is yet, I don't think she would be adverse to doing a little digging to find out.

Snape smirked for no reason Harry could discern, and nodded, and then they pulled their heads out of the Pensieve memory.

Harry gasped and blinked, before realizing that he had Fawkes on one shoulder and Argutus on the other, and the memories of the spell in his mind. He gave one hard smile and strode towards the door.

"Do not try to do too much," Snape called after him.

Harry glanced back over his shoulder. "I'm not. I'm just going to do what I need to do, and explain to certain people how very, very angry they've made me." He opened Snape's door and nodded crisply to his three guards. They all blinked at him, Draco not excepted. It seemed that they'd been expecting him to come out of Snape's office bleeding and vomiting.

Not now. Maybe not ever again. Obviously, this is like what happened when I didn't warn the Ravenclaws enough. People think they can push me. They're going to find out that binding people under webs and hurting magical creatures is just not on.

"Come on," he said. "I've got to go talk to the Headmistress." He strode snappily up the corridor towards the Great Hall.

Fawkes was crooning a sunrise song on his shoulder, and Argutus was telling him what web he thought they should break next. Harry felt his heart lift higher and higher. His anger grew talons and breathed more fire on the way.

This is going to be really damn fun.

Albus could not move. The Still-Beetle confinement would not allow him to. But he could shudder in his head as Harry snapped the spell and cast him back into the solitude of his own thoughts.

Harry had broken the web with the help of a phoenix and his own loss at Voldemort's hands—not the help of a single, human wizard, and without a reference to either Light or Dark magic, for all that a creature of the Light had aided him.

There was a vates abroad in the world, and Albus had only one more chance to stop him.

Albus could feel the first coming of regret towering above him like a storm in the North Sea.

He knew that wave after wave, of pain and horror and loss, would follow it.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Make Some Noise

Draco told himself it was not childish to go a little weak in the knees at the sight of Harry as he came out of Snape's office. His eyes were ablaze, as they tended to be in moments of high emotion, and Argutus glowed with shifting colors on his arm, and Fawkes shone on his shoulder. He was aglow with light, but not the weak kind of Light that Light wizards served and Draco's father had often told him to beware of, lest it should trick him into servitude through false promises. This was light like lightning, like sea-fire blooming and leaping on the masts of a doomed ship.

This was light that made Harry look really damn good.

Draco followed obediently as they made their way to the Headmistress's office, though he did wonder if Harry knew the current password. As it turned out, he didn't need to. Fawkes lifted his voice and threw a note like an arrow at the gargoyle. The heavy creature gathered itself and shifted aside, its limbs grinding and shuffling on the stone.

Harry stepped onto the staircase, and Draco made sure he was the one who stood at Harry's right shoulder. The Hufflepuff girl and Neelda meant well, he was sure, but neither of them was as good at spotting small threats to Harry as he was. Besides, Harry glanced back once, as if he expected to see him standing there, and Draco didn't think he could disappoint him.

Harry's hand found his, and squeezed.

More sure than ever that he had made the right decision, Draco hardly heard the Headmistress's voice saying, "Come in."

When the door opened, they found McGonagall on her feet, one hand on her head and her expression pained. That look melted the moment she saw Harry. She stood straight then, and Draco thought he saw her draw in a breath as of cleansing sea-air. She nodded at Harry.

“Well, Mr. Potter?” she asked quietly. It only occurred to Draco a moment later that she wasn’t treating Harry at all like a student.

“You’ve canceled classes for today?” Harry asked her.

McGonagall nodded. “With the chaos exploding in the Great Hall, with memories suddenly rushing back to students and professors alike and emotions shifting so suddenly, it seemed the most prudent course,” she added dryly.

“Dumbledore was spreading a web,” said Harry, without bothering to introduce the subject. Draco hissed a bit at the thought that Harry had broken another web and he hadn’t been there to see it, but Harry’s hand found and squeezed his again, which somewhat helped to make up for the disappointment. “It was a powerful, old Light spell, which subtly influenced people against me and ate the memories of those who discovered it. Of course there’s no way to tell immediately which actions people took against me were influenced by that, and to what degree. But I think canceling classes for today is a good first step. It gives people some time to recover and think about what they feel.”

McGonagall closed her eyes and thinned her lips. “And another shame falls to the House of Gryffindor,” she said softly. “I am sorry, Harry. Godric’s children have not done very well by you.”

Draco looked down to conceal a smile. He could see advantages in this shame of Gryffindor’s, though he doubted Harry would see the same thing. Draco had not been blind to the fact that Slytherin House was gaining in prominence, that people—save those students against Harry—tended not to make as many jokes about them or assume they were evil automatically, as they had last year. Their rival House being willing to hide its head about now was another point in their favor.

“You didn’t have anything to do with it, Headmistress McGonagall,” said Harry dismissively, which rather wasn’t paying attention to politics, in Draco’s mind. “It does mean that I need to contact the Minister, and inform him of the spell, and get him to reason out which of his actions towards me in the last little while were prompted by the

spell, and which were genuine. It'll affect publicity, the trial procedures, the members of the Wizengamot they might choose to judge the trial—all that." Harry shrugged as if none of it mattered more than any other part. Draco thought he was the only one in the room who knew him well enough to see how his shoulders trembled at the mention of the trial. "I'll have to talk to other people too, of course, but the Minister first. I need to ask your permission to be absent from the school today, at least, and perhaps for several days, and I need to know how far you're willing to back me on opposing the Minister, if that's what I need to do."

"I believe you entirely, Harry," said McGonagall at once, which earned her a few points in Draco's eyes. "Creating a lie like this isn't in your character. If you need my help with Minister Scrimgeour, you shall have it."

Harry's eyes closed for a moment. Draco wasn't facing him, but he knew they did it anyway, by the crinkles in the side of his face. He felt a moment's smugness in being that familiar with Harry, and then an even greater smugness at the thought that Harry was his, all his.

"Thank you, Headmistress," Harry breathed. "And I'm afraid I need to borrow two of your professors for my journey to the Ministry. I'd like both Professor Snape and Professor Lupin to escort me."

"Is Professor Lupin a wise choice, Harry?" McGonagall asked gently. "It is true that I nearly dared the Minister to oppose me by giving him a job here, but Hogwarts is distant from the Ministry, and Scrimgeour is less concerned with me than Fudge was with—Dumbledore. Bringing a werewolf into Scrimgeour's own territory may strain your relationship."

"If it can be strained that easily, then I don't want to preserve it intact," said Harry. "Besides, bringing along a former Death Eater is risky, too. I want to show the Minister that I don't intend to back down and be as calm and tame as I have been so far."

Draco frowned. When has Harry ever been tame or calm? But he had refrained from much political prodding into the Ministry in the last few months. Perhaps that was what he meant.

"I think Professor Lupin is still in the Great Hall, calming students," said McGonagall quietly. "Would you like me to go get him, Harry, or would you prefer to go yourself?"

Harry took a deep breath. "I want to go myself."

McGonagall gave him a fierce, appreciative smile. "Then I wish you good luck, Harry," she said, and sat back down behind her desk.

Draco again managed to be right at Harry's shoulder as they entered the moving staircase, and he murmured in his ear, "I hope that you don't think you can leave me behind. We're going to the Ministry together."

Harry tilted his head back; they stood so close that he could let it rest on Draco's shoulder. Draco lost his breath at the feeling of Harry's hair on his cheek.

"I wouldn't want it any other way," Harry said.

I am angry, and I have a right to be angry.

That was the sentiment Harry kept repeating to himself, and it stood him in good stead as he strode back into the Great Hall. Professor Lupin and Professor Flitwick were near the front of the room, speaking softly with several overexcited students. They didn't see him as soon as the students themselves did.

Harry saw their faces tighten in shock. Several of them looked away from him. Those would be people who had figured out some difference in their thoughts about him, Harry thought. Others simply stared, as if they knew that something was different but didn't know what or why. A wake of whispers ran behind him as he marched towards the Professors.

It wasn't their fault, said part of Harry's mind, the older and more familiar part. It was the spell.

But with most of his fury escaped, it was impossible to put the rest of it away so easily. It snarled in his ears, and reminded him of what Margaret had done to Argutus, what Marietta had done to him with the encouragement of her Death Eater boyfriend—though probably not with the knowledge that he was a Death Eater—and what Rovenan had done. Harry knew Dumbledore's spell had seized and worked on what small feelings their minds might have harbored towards him, blowing up tiny clouds into great storms.

But those feelings were still there in the first place. Margaret hated me for something that happened in second year. Marietta hated me—because, apparently. Rovenan still became a Death Eater, and I don't think I was the only reason why.

Harry felt himself tense when he was a few feet away from Lupin and someone stepped up behind him. He heard Draco drawing his wand, but he didn't get a chance to say anything before the person said, "Dolor immoderatus."

Harry didn't recognize the voice, but he recognized the pain curse she was casting—probably at Isabell or Hannah—and he swung around and lifted his hand. His fury and his magic, both roused, rose together with a spat note from Fawkes, and turned her curse in mid-flight, changing it into a red spell that bounced back at her like a dagger. The caster, Lucy Turtledove, Margaret's friend, shrieked, and put one hand to her face. Harry saw her skin cracking and flushing, as if she had a bad sunburn. It spread from her cheeks to her chin, and Lucy yelped and dropped a hand when she touched her cheek, flinching, as if the intense heat were too much for her to bear.

Satisfaction as hot as the burn licked along Harry's spine like flames. He knew his lips had twisted into a smile, but he didn't know what it looked like, save that Lucy stared at him and as quickly glanced away.

"I broke a web that was spread over you," he said, raising his voice so that everyone could hear him. "Albus Dumbledore cast a spell that worked on your emotions and tried to compel you to hinder me. I thought that your hatred would cease with the web's removal." He

fastened his eyes on Lucy. "It seems that I was wrong, and that some of you are not that intelligent."

Lucy was staring at him again, one hand clenched so tightly around her wand that Harry thought she would break it. That would be something to see. Her eyes glowed with hatred. "You're lying," she whispered. "Headmaster Dumbledore would never do that. You're lying."

"I am not," said Harry. "And even if I was, you have no excuse for trying to attack other students. Didn't Rovenan teach you anything?" His gaze went to her covered left arm. "Do you have something to hide, Turtledove?" he added, and made sure that his voice dripped false solicitude.

She seemed to choke. "How dare you—how dare you imply—"

"If you don't have anything to hide, then you should have no trouble showing your arm." Harry moved a step forward, knowing that he had turned the mood of the room against her, and that she would be stinging with embarrassment, and that he was enjoying this, much as he told himself he shouldn't. "Bare it for me."

"Why should I?" Lucy's chin went up. "You're a liar, I know you are, a Dark wizard, one who doesn't have any reason to tell the truth and just likes to show up those who are performing a useful service to the school!" She nodded to Margaret Parsons, who was lurking behind her, but avoided Harry's eyes when he tried to catch hers. "You cursed Margaret with a humiliating spell, and you've—"

"Received permission to defend himself with magic, as you should know full well, Miss Turtledove," said Remus, appearing beside them like a wraith, as graceful and as silent. Flitwick was behind him, his face reflecting deep disapproval as he gazed at the students of his House confronting Harry.

"Fifty points from Ravenclaw," Remus continued, his amber eyes dangerous. "You owe Mr. Potter at least the courtesy of listening to the truth." He ignored Lucy's spluttering entirely and turned to Harry. "Was there something you needed, Harry?"

Since he could hear Flitwick scolding Lucy, Harry felt secure enough in himself to nod. "Yes. I want you to come with me to the Ministry. I've got to tell Minister Scrimgeour about the spell." He held Remus's eyes. "You'll be going with Professor Snape, because I thought you were the best choice."

Reflections of several possibilities shone in Remus's gaze, but he simply inclined his head. "I'll go, Harry. You have the Headmistress's permission, I trust?"

Harry nodded. "I'll meet you by the front doors in a half-hour, then," said Remus, and turned to look at Lucy again. "It could be sooner, I know," he added, anticipating Harry's words long before he gave them, "but I have something to deal with here, first."

Harry worried that Remus would hurt her, with the rational part of him. The angry part of him chuckled and let him turn, to march out between two lines of students trying very hard not to stare at him, and go fetch Snape.

Rufus Scrimgeour was not having a very good day.

There had been the sourness in the back of his throat when he read the Daily Prophet article this morning, and saw Potter smashing Augurey chicks over the head. He could not believe it, but more than the literal truth of the article, what it portended made him close his eyes and swallow.

There was fear abroad in the wizarding world, and hatred, of a child with Lord-level power.

Rufus had been three years behind Tom Riddle in Hogwarts. He had seen what happened to a boy like that who was revered by some, but hated by just as many. Riddle had split Slytherin down the middle, some of them clinging to him and some turning away, and some of those who turned away had received—strange wounds. No one could prove Riddle had done it, but on the other hand, no one else came forward to claim credit for the dangerous pranks, either. Rufus had kept his head down, his vow to the Light at the age of twelve largely

protecting him. Riddle had ignored him in contempt, and most of the others thought he was too odd to bother with.

And now there was another child who had power as strong as Riddle's—or stronger, really, than they had been at comparable ages, though Rufus was not at all sure who would be more powerful once Potter had grown to manhood—and people hating him. Harry could so easily do as Riddle did, turning in on himself in the face of that loathing. It would be worse for him, Rufus knew, because Harry would not understand it the way Riddle had. That first Lord had handled it with a raised brow and a sneer. Harry tried to make things better for those who hated him.

Sooner or later, though, forgiveness and good will had to run out. Sooner or later, they could wind up with another Slytherin Lord who chose to embrace Dark Arts, so that respect would at least mingle with the hatred.

And there was the suspicion, niggling and whispering in the back of Rufus's head, that Harry might one day decide to turn his sights on the Ministry, that his silence so far was ominous, that he should have been in contact and badgering Rufus to do something about the werewolf laws by now. What if he was gathering power in an attempt to take the Ministry over? What if he did manage to destroy the refuge of ordinary wizards after all?

Rufus wearily rubbed his forehead. He couldn't remember how long he'd had those suspicions. Since July, he thought.

And then, as he sipped his tea and contemplated the Argus Veritaserum articles he'd saved and wished his respect for the right of the Daily Prophet's reporters to say whatever the hell they wanted would yield just enough to allow him to arrest Veritaserum—sometimes, it was a problem having morals—everything changed.

Rufus spilled his tea, which was never calculated to put him in a good mood. He stood up, wand whipping into his hand, and glanced around the office. He frowned. There had been a sparkling mist over everything a moment ago, and now it was gone.

Wasn't it?

But why was there a sparkling mist in my office in the first place?

Rufus strode rapidly to the door and threw it open. Young Tonks was the guard on the office this morning. Of course, she started and tripped over her robes, sprawling full-length on the floor.

Waiting for her to recover, Rufus stared in several directions and even sniffed. Come to think of it, a faint smell he had got used to was gone, too. It had been the smell of rotten eggs. But why should he have got used to that? Surely not even the most incompetent of Auror trainees would have to wear the hex that made them smell like that for more than a week. Smelling like rotten eggs was an excellent incentive to master the correct spells.

"What is it, sir?" Tonks squeaked, popping back up again.

"I want to speak to—" Damn. Not Mallory. Rufus still had to pause and remember that his most trusted second-in-command had disgraced herself, sometimes. "Auror Burke. Right now."

Tonks simply ran off, not even pausing for a "Yes, sir!" Hopefully that would help make up for the several times she tripped on the way. Rufus shut his door and returned to his desk.

His glance fell on the Veritaserum article about the Augureys, and he read a few lines. He frowned. Who would believe this drivel? It was still a cause for concern since it spoke of the attitude some people held towards Potter, of course, but suddenly it seemed much less compelling than it had been.

Someone cast a spell on me.

Rufus tapped his wand against his palm, speeding up as he began to pace back and forth, only slightly favoring his bad leg. He could think of only a few wizards who would have the skill to get such a spell past his complicated, layered wards on the office, and most of them were either in Tullianum or running around with Voldemort. Of course, Rufus couldn't discount that the Dark Lord might want to hex him, but

such a subtle spell wasn't really his style. Voldemort liked to announce his presence. Besides, wouldn't he have had the spell do something else? Command Rufus to become a Death Eater and take the Dark Mark, for example?

What was the spell meant to make me do?

It was an unanswerable question for right now, and Rufus tucked it away. He went back to numbering down candidates who could have done this kind of thing.

There was Dumbledore. He certainly had the raw power, but he was in Still-Beetle confinement. One couldn't use magic through Still-Beetle confinement. Of course, one couldn't cast magic on Dumbledore, either, but that was all right. The beetles would make sure that he was still alive, his body preserved as it had been at the moment the shell was thrown. He could remain locked up neat and tight until they were ready to try him.

And there was Potter.

Rufus scowled. His suspicions about Potter wanting to take over the Ministry no longer seemed quite as potent as they had been, either. On the other hand, if Potter didn't answer an owl, then Rufus thought he would be justified in suspecting him. He went to his desk and sat down, intending to write a polite letter.

He was halfway through the first paragraph when the door opened, and Auror Burke came in. Rufus sat back, linking his hands behind his head and studying her. Burke was a Dark family, almost all of them, though some of the bastards had the decency to stay neutral. Auror Priscilla Burke was one of those. She hadn't Declared, though her husband had. She was fiercely, yet quietly, independent. She got things done. Rufus had chosen her because he trusted her to look out for her own interests, and to have the cool-headedness that Fiona Mallory lacked. If she ever became involved in a case that targeted one of her family, for instance, she would hand the reins over to someone else. Fiona hadn't been able to keep away from the Potters, and look where it got her.

“Sir,” said Burke, sitting down in the chair opposite his desk and inclining her head cordially. She was tall for a woman, and could look him directly in the eye. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yes,” said Rufus. “Did you feel a change in your thoughts about ten minutes ago?”

Burke’s eyes widened, then narrowed. “I noticed something,” she said. “The air around me felt lighter, and I remembered a few things I’d forgotten from the past months, about times I suspected I was under a spell. But I couldn’t see any visible effects. Besides, none of the wards on my office rang. Do you think that there really was a spell, sir?”

“I’m positive,” said Rufus. “And the wizards who could cast a spell able to get in under our wards are rare, as I’m sure you know.”

Burke nodded. Her face had gone pale. Rufus cocked his head. Her husband is Potter’s ally, but I had thought she’d kept distant enough from the war to keep her job here. Perhaps not.

“Were you exempt from the spell because you are Potter’s ally?” he asked quietly.

“Sir, I—I really don’t know.” Burke shook her head and gave him what he thought was an honest, if anguished, look. “I don’t think he would do something like that. He’s vates, about freeing the magical creatures. I don’t think he’d enslave wizards to do it. From what I understand, he can’t, or he loses everything he’s become.”

Rufus jerked his head in a short movement neither nod nor shake. Yes, he’d heard that too, but Merlin knew that Potter had enough power to be a Lord, and Merlin knew no wizard was immune to temptation. Rufus could see Potter Declaring himself a Lord out of genuine desire to do good, forgetting that wizards and witches who did not have his extraordinary magic were people, too.

“I would like you to go through the Department,” he said. “Quietly. Find out who seems to have recovered from this spell, who remembers nothing, and who still might be under it.”

Burke was just nodding when his door flew open. Rufus lifted his head and narrowed his eyes when he saw Tonks standing there. “Nymphadora,” he said, to show how displeased he was. “What is it?”

“It’s Mallory, sir,” said Tonks, gulping several times. “She’s broken free of her confinement. She insists now that she wasn’t that angry at the Potter parents, and she doesn’t know why she let herself be arrested. She says that she was manipulated, her emotions exaggerated.”

Rufus cursed softly. If that is the effect of the damn spell, we have more of a problem on our hands than we imagined.

But Fiona’s escape was a bigger one. Rufus knew she was the strongest wizard in the Ministry right now, excepting the confined Albus Dumbledore. And if she’d decided to forego rationality enough to break the wards on her cell, then she might well use her wandless magic to kill.

“Tell me where she is,” he ordered Tonks, drawing his wand.

“Sir, you can’t—“

“I’m the only one who has a chance of getting through to her,” said Rufus. “Tell me now, damnit.”

Tonks bowed her head. “Second floor, sir. Just past the lifts.”

Rufus nodded, and lifted the thread hanging around his neck, which held several small ordinary objects, made into Portkeys, one for each floor of the Ministry. They were the only ones that worked in the confines of the building all the time, without special dispensation. He grasped the one for the second floor, and felt the familiar dizzying whirl grab him and then deposit him in the middle of the Auror office.

Most of his Aurors were missing from their desks. Rufus could hear a silence from up the corridor, which was worse than the sounds of battle. More to the point, he could feel Fiona’s magic in the air. The walls and floor shimmered with heat. Rufus winced. He’d been one of

the first Aurors on the scene after Fiona had killed her abusive father when she was sixteen. The man had been covered with burns so deep he hadn't been recognizable as human.

"Steady does it," he muttered, in encouragement to himself, and started forward.

He made it through half the desks before he caught a glimpse of movement under one. He dropped at once to a battle-crouch, wincing as his bad leg pained him. He caught a glimpse of a startled face, and then red hair.

"Weasley," he said, nodding to Percy. "Do you know where Mallory is?"

Weasley shuddered, but he had a hold of his wand, and Rufus knew he'd been hiding as part of a strategy, not out of fear. "Still in the second-floor corridor, sir," he said. "She tried the lifts, but Madam Bones had already cast a spell to make them refuse to carry her. She was screaming about finding Albus Dumbledore and making him pay for this."

Rufus sighed. So there's no doubt about who she blames it on, at least. "Come with me, Weasley," he ordered, and had the satisfaction of hearing Percy fall in behind him as he threaded his way through the desks. He'd known he had potential Auror material in that one from the first time he looked into his eyes. Potter had done him a favor there, identifying Weasley as one of the spies Dumbledore was trying to plant in the Ministry and warning Rufus about it. Rufus had taken the opportunity to snare the younger man's loyalty for himself. No sense in wasting someone who could do the Ministry so much good.

They rounded the corner that led out of the office, and the heat immediately grew stronger. Rufus gripped his wand, and stepped out into the middle of the hallway.

He nearly stepped on Auror Feverfew, lying motionless on the ground. Rufus estimated his state of health with one glance, and relaxed when he saw that the young man still breathed. His burns were bad,

though, at least second-degree. Rufus shook his head, and felt his mouth harden into a thin, determined line. This was why he didn't like powerful wizards and witches. They were apt to let their magic rule them, and think they had the right to do anything they wanted just because of what they could do.

Well, Fiona was about to learn better.

A few more steps, and he saw her, standing in front of the lifts and attacking them with blast after blast of wandless magic. She hadn't noticed them coming, but then Weasley stepped heavily, and she whipped towards them. She went quite still when she caught sight of Rufus.

Rufus made a quick decision. Fiona's eyes were crazed, her own skin blistering and crackling with the force of the raw magic that bled from her. He had been about to try reason, to persuade her that she was a principled Auror and didn't need to do this, but he knew now she wouldn't listen.

"Calx de Achilles," he murmured, a spell that he didn't use often, a spell as near the Dark Arts as he would let himself get. When it was a choice between Fiona hitting him and Weasley and this spell, though, the Achilles' Heel Curse would win out every time.

The spell lashed, seeking and finding Fiona's weak point. It would have been easily defeated if she had shields, but she didn't; she was too far gone in rage to have them.

Her eyes widened, and she made a little moaning noise as one of her worst memories welled up and overwhelmed her. Then she slumped to the floor, unconscious. Rufus quickly shot binding ropes from his wand, tying her wrists and ankles together and forcing her to lie still.

He left Weasley to fetch a Healer for Feverfew and cart Fiona back to the cells, advising him to work with several other Aurors to set up stronger wards this time, and then went back to his office. Potter was indeed going to have some explaining to do.

He was gratified when Tonks informed him that Potter had already arrived. He smiled grimly and stepped into the office, seeing the boy waiting with Severus Snape, the young Malfoy boy, and a man who was obviously a werewolf.

Does he want to issue a challenge? Then I'll meet it.

Harry turned his head as Scrimgeour stalked into the office. He had often thought the Minister was like an old lion, but that was never truer than now. His yellow eyes all but glowed, and he had a deep purr to his voice as he spoke—though not the kind of purr a cat would give on being stroked.

“Potter. My Ministry has gone quite mad this morning, and I think I am relieved of a spell I don't remembering being under. I trust that you can shed some light on this?”

Harry smiled slightly. He knew it wasn't a pleasant smile. He didn't mean it to be. He had seen the look on Scrimgeour's face when he saw Remus, and the flicker of discomfort and disdain that passed over his features when he identified him as a werewolf. That is going to be our next battle, isn't it, Minister? That is, if you don't convince yourself that I did Dumbledore's dirty work.

“I know about the spell,” he said. “It's Dumbledore's. He cast a web of compulsion across Britain that made people think as unfavorably of me as possible. I would wager that you probably thought I was set to muck about in the Ministry. I'm not. I broke the compulsion, and I'm here to let you know about it. I have no idea how long it will take your people to recover, or what lasting damage they might have from this spell. I do think that you should move Dumbledore to an isolated cell in Tullianum until his trial, so that no one else has a chance to get to him.”

Scrimgeour's eyes became slits, and he walked behind his desk before he spoke again. Harry felt Draco's hand on his shoulder. He moved back into the support, but didn't lean back, though the grip invited him to. He couldn't afford to look weak in the Minister's eyes right now.

“No one can cast magic through Still-Beetle confinement,” said Scrimgeour. “Not even a Light Lord.”

“Someone raised it, then,” said Harry.

Scrimgeour jerked like a fish on a line. “Impossible. I looked over the Aurors myself, and purged them of anyone who might even have been tempted to free Dumbledore. Besides, why wouldn’t he have cast more powerful magic if he did have the chance to?”

“Because he prefers subtle spells.” Harry moved a step forward. Draco and Snape and Remus all moved with him. He was amused at that, but he kept his amusement off his face. It would only do to let Scrimgeour see hardness in his eyes right now. “He wanted the chance to make it seem as if the wizarding world itself had decided he was innocent. That was the only way to retain his old reputation and his old power. And as for purging your Aurors—well, Minister, Auror Mallory tortured my parents. I think you should look over the ranks again.”

Scrimgeour’s nostrils flared just slightly. Then he said, “You’ve informed me of the spell, Potter. I believe you, provisionally. It doesn’t sound as though you would cast the kind of spell that made hatred of you possible. But if that’s all you want, why march up to me with this phalanx?” He moved his head to indicate Snape, Remus, and even Draco. Harry supposed that Draco’s narrow-eyed protective look might have something to do with it.

“Because I have a guard everywhere I go, these days,” said Harry, fighting the temptation to roll his eyes. “Because there were Death Eaters in Hogwarts.” He drew in a deep breath. He hadn’t recited his final purpose to any of the three coming with him. So far as they were concerned, this was mostly a journey to let the Minister know what was what, and just where he stood in relation to the structure of political power in wizarding Britain. But Harry did have something else in mind, and he would say it now. “And because I want you to see that I’m serious about my goals. All of them. I will use my power, though I won’t compel people. That means that you’re going to have a challenge on the werewolf laws, Minister.”

Scrimgeour just nodded. Remus, though, shook at Harry's side as though he'd heard a wolf howl.

"And it means that you're going to have to move my parents' trial date," said Harry, getting out the sentence all at once.

Draco's hand tightened on his shoulder, and Snape snarled. Remus growled, a more frightening sound. Scrimgeour raised an eyebrow. "Why?" he asked.

"Because the atmosphere's been poisoned, now," said Harry. "Do you have to ask? Some people hate me, some people love me, and that'll include members of the Wizengamot. There is no way that my parents will get a fair trial. Shift the date to a time when more people know about the spell and have a chance to recover from its effects. December should work, I think."

Scrimgeour studied him in silence. That gave Draco the chance to lean forward and whisper into Harry's ear, "Are you insane? You're already stressed about this, and you want to move the trial back further, and put yourself under more stress?"

"It's not about me," Harry snapped back at him. "It's about applying the principles of justice fairly and evenly."

"I agree with Mr. Malfoy."

Harry's heart stopped. He had never thought he would hear Scrimgeour say something like that—either agreeing with a Malfoy, or going against his own principles. He turned his head back slowly, inch by inch, and stared hard at the Minister, who didn't stir.

"But, sir," said Harry, fighting the urge to cry out, "you don't know yourself when your own feelings towards me changed. You'll have to wait until the spell breaks completely. You—"

"Did you, or did you not, break the web of the spell, Mr. Potter?" Scrimgeour asked. "Are you, or are you not, vates?"

"It's gone," Harry whispered.

Scrimgeour nodded sharply. "Then I will advise the Wizengamot to clear their minds as much as possible in the three weeks we have remaining. Speak with mediwizards if they need to, or a skilled Occlumens. They will be ready by the time the trial comes, Potter." His face darkened for a moment. "Dumbledore's trial will be the problem. I am glad that will not be until March."

"I would prefer this not happen, sir," Harry said steadily.

"The evidence came in before Dumbledore could possibly have cast the spell, since he wasn't in confinement then," Scrimgeour countered. "The Pensieve memories are still fact. They will still serve as evidence during the trial."

Harry ducked his head and said nothing. He could feel the anger burning, the temptation to just lash out and change things, but he would not. There were some things even his magic and his temper would not allow him to do.

Draco's hand stroked softly at his shoulder, and pulled him back to himself, reminding him what things he still had to be angry about. "Minister, do you know who Argus Veritaserum is?"

Scrimgeour shook his head. "I was trying to find that out myself."

"Thank you," said Harry. "Then I think I have nothing further to say to you, unless you want to say something to me?"

Scrimgeour shook his head again. Harry nodded back once, and then turned and ducked out of the office.

Snape hissed at once, "Harry, what were you thinking? To get your parents' trial pushed back—"

"I want them to have every chance," said Harry, staring straight ahead. His hand was clutching the quill-shaped amulet he would use to call Skeeter. He would set her digging to find out who Argus Veritaserum was, and who had murdered the Augurey chicks. That

was a good thing, a thing he could be angry about without more complicated emotions in the background.

Remus said softly, "Harry, what Lily and James did to you was wrong."

Not this again. Harry turned on them, and the look in his eyes was evidently enough to silence them. Draco was the only one who didn't draw back, but stared at him with a slightly open mouth. Harry ignored that. Perhaps he was too stunned by the sudden movement to know how to react otherwise.

"I know that," he said. "I accept that the trial date won't be moved. Everything is fine. Now, come on. I want to set Skeeter on Veritaserum's trail before the day is much older."

He marched off, ignoring the rest of what Remus and Snape said. No point in getting angry about things he couldn't change.

He could find out who was impersonating him, though, and get to the bottom of that. And when he did...

The anger burned like fine wine in the bottom of his belly, like a promise on the lips of an enemy. Yes. I think I will enjoy that even more.

Intermission: Breathing In the Moments Between

Harry stood in front of the grass that Occluded his scar link to Voldemort, and felt the pain streaming from beyond it.

Voldemort was doing—something. Harry could feel him exulting sometimes, or growing angry, or weaving magic in dense spells that seemed to center on the sort of elaborate preparations a ritual might require. But he felt all those sensations only in the first moments they occurred. They all wound up ebbing into pain.

He could see what was happening, if he removed the grass.

Harry closed his eyes and clenched down on the temptation to do so. He could feel Fawkes's warm bond pulsing in the back of his mind, but the phoenix was asleep, and not sharing this—this odd thing, whatever it was, this mixture of dream and vision. Fawkes couldn't stop him if he did choose to go down the scar link and look at the thoughts currently occupying Voldemort's mind.

But if he did that, he stood a good chance of pulling Draco along with him.

And if he didn't, there was the chance that Voldemort might go right on draining Muggleborn children of their magic, or torturing his victims, or preparing a Dark spell to make himself immortal. Harry didn't think any of those things beyond Voldemort. He rubbed his hand over his left wrist.

He had to stop Voldemort. It was his duty to stop Voldemort.

But in doing so, he would endanger Draco. And he was sure that Draco and Snape and the others would say that he was endangering himself, and the war effort.

He shifted back and forth in front of the grass, restlessly. All his rage couldn't help him now. It just urged him to charge forward, damn and forget the consequences. He stood there, irresolute, and the irresolution tore and tugged at him, shredding his guts and going straight for his heart. It wasn't quite as painful as the Entrail-Expelling

Curse, but now that he'd felt that, Harry had something to compare this to.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, shaking him. Surprised, Harry blinked and woke. His vision hadn't been intense enough to disturb Draco's sleep, had it? Now, that he really wouldn't forgive himself for.

He called his glasses to him with a wandless, wordless spell, and slid them on his face, peering up. Yes, it was Draco who woke him, but his face was anxious, worried, not angry. Harry frowned. Did something happen while I was asleep?

"Draco?" he asked. "Your parents? Are they all right?"

Draco's face flickered into confusion, and he shook his head. "Yes, of course, they're fine," he said. Then his eyes widened, and he said, "Ah. Yes. You thought I woke you up because I had bad news?" He pushed at Harry's shoulder until he moved over, and then sat down on the bed.

"Well, yes," said Harry. "If you were angry, I thought you would have started scolding me, but the worry—"

"Is for you, you prat," said Draco softly, and kissed him on the temple. "I woke up to get a glass of water and heard you whimpering. Are you all right?"

Harry considered not discussing it. But this had nothing to do with his feelings for his parents, which he did still prefer to keep to himself, and he didn't want to lie to Draco about it. He couldn't pretend that he'd been sleeping peacefully, so he told the truth.

"I can feel Voldemort moving. Doing—something. I knew I could get more details if I just removed the barrier Snape helped me put over the connection we have. But I knew I might also hurt you if I did that." Harry gave a helpless little hiss, his rage coming to mean more now that he was out of the dream. "I hate being indecisive."

"I'm glad you didn't remove the barrier," said Draco. His arm snaked around Harry's shoulders, and he tugged him close against his side.

“Yes, I knew you’d say that,” said Harry, his words muffled by the cloth of Draco’s shirt. “My life is more important to you than seeing Voldemort defeated.”

“Yes. It is.” Draco’s voice made that not a banal fact, but a whole new truth. “You are more important to me than this war, Harry, and your life is more important than any knowledge. Without you, we fall.” He gently touched Harry’s hair. Harry couldn’t even tell with what, his lips or his fingers, so light was the gesture. “You need to stay alive for the rest of us, if you won’t stay alive for your own sake.”

Harry gave another uncomfortable wriggle. Normally, he could have tolerated more contact than this, but Draco’s intent focus on him made it unnerving. Draco let him pull away, but gripped his face and held it still as he looked into his eyes.

“Do you believe me?”

“I believe you,” said Harry. It was impossible to doubt Draco believing it, and that was really what was at stake here. How Harry valued his own life wasn’t that important.

“Good. Now lie down and go to sleep, and don’t worry about this any more. You have so many people who love you, Harry, who are willing to stand behind you.” Draco curled up on the bed in a clear sign that he didn’t intend to leave and go back to his own.

Harry lay down a short distance from him to soothe his own jangled nerves, just barely able to tolerate Draco’s arm as it draped over his shoulder. Now, though, he had something else to worry about, his mind singing Draco’s words.

Do my allies really follow me, and not my ideals? If I died, would the alliance dissolve and no one try to follow Connor or anyone else who might carry on the fight against Voldemort?

I don’t want that to be true. It was true for Dumbledore. I don’t want it to be true for me. One person shouldn’t be more important than the whole of this battle. If I die, they have to keep fighting.

How do I make them see that?

The way to make them see that was not, manifestly, to be the goal of a hive of the Many the next morning, as they rolled into the Great Hall in their usual writhing mass and made straight for the Slytherin table.

Some of the Slytherins, who should know better, were looking nervous. Harry rolled his eyes and stooped, holding out his right arm. Luckily, Fawkes had decided to stay in the bedroom this morning, and Argutus was out exploring the school, so there was no one to object as the Many traveled smoothly up the offered limb and over his body. Harry felt a sense of relaxation pervade him that he hadn't experienced in a month, since the battle on the beach and the last time he'd had the Many swarming and draped on him. With so many small snakes around him, snakes who were formally allied to him and whose poison could kill or permanently blind someone else, he felt safe. None of the Ravenclaws, or anyone else, would dare attack him now.

"We want to give you one of our children," said the hive.

Harry frowned. By the tone of their voices and the fact that they hadn't cared about the staring eyes and screams they got as they roamed through the Great Hall, this was the younger hive, the one he'd actually seen hatched in the Forbidden Forest and freed from their web. He hadn't thought they were old enough to lay eggs and have children of their own yet. Granted, the life cycle of South African hive cobras was one of the expanse of things he was no expert in. "You have young already?"

"No. Children is what we call a member of the hive who is eyes and fangs and nothing else," said the ebbing voices. One of the cobras draped around Harry's arm moved, and then slithered up his body to his face, the others rolling smoothly back to make room for it. No, her, Harry supposed, noting the subtle waver in the golden ripples that supposedly indicated that this snake could lay eggs. "She cannot hold the collective mind. She will serve as eyes for us when we must see you, though. And she will attack at any moment you command her."

“Bite someone to death,” said Harry flatly, “or blind them.” The small snake was locked around his neck. She didn’t sway like the others. She simply remained tucked down, under his chin, and held him in a tight clutch that didn’t feel tight. Harry reached up, and could barely tell where her scales left off and his skin began.

“Yes. You are in danger. We do not want to lose our benefactor. And our child does not need to eat or sleep. She will guard you day and night.”

Harry ran a finger over her tail. “And I can’t refuse the gift?”

“You would die,” said the Many simply. “There are enemies everywhere. We have met with our little brother, the snake you gave the name in the tongue of wizards. He told you about the attacks on you, on him, on everything and everyone dear to you. The vates may die of age or in breaking a web or in fighting the mighty wizards, but he will not die because of a shot spell from an enemy he should not care about. She is here to defend you from those you trust too much, those who creep up on you.”

Harry nodded in resignation. With the constant attacks from the Ravensclaws, he could hardly say that he had no need for such a gift, though he was still somewhat disturbed by it. He had assumed that all members of a hive of the Many were equal, that there weren’t empty vessels. It seemed that he’d been wrong, and would just have to accept that.

In a way, it’s good. There is more wonder in them than I ever guessed. They’re not bound by human ideals, and why should they be?

“Thank you,” he said.

The Many writhed, doing a graceful dance to accept the gratitude, for all Harry knew, and then slid down and away, tumbling across the Great Hall and towards the door.

Harry just shook his head when Draco arched an eyebrow, and sat down between him and George Weasley, his guards for the moment.

"The magical creatures have decided I should be guarded, too," he muttered. "I'm going to have no privacy."

"Why, Harry." George leaned towards him and leered. "Why would you want to have some privacy? Got some things to do that you don't want to show anyone, do you?" His eyes flicked towards Draco.

Harry rolled his eyes and ignored Draco's glare and his own threatening blush. "Shut it," he said, and stood, testing the slight weight of the snake around his throat. It was very light, to tell the truth. She either wasn't wrapped tightly enough to constrict his breathing, or knew how to shift when she might have done so. "Let's get to class."
"Miss Turtledove."

Remus wondered what he had to thank for the way Lucy Turtledove froze and squeaked when she heard his voice—his being a werewolf, or the fact that he'd assigned the Ravenclaw girl two weeks of detention with Filch the last time she threatened Harry. Probably the first, from the way she turned and stared at his teeth. Besides, if the punishment had made that much of an impact on her, she wouldn't have been creeping along behind Harry and his guards on their way to Defense Against the Dark Arts, trying to take an opportunity for a good hexing.

"I wasn't doing anything." Turtledove folded her arms and frowned at him, tossing her long dark hair over one shoulder. "You can't assign me detention or take points. I wasn't doing anything."

Remus held her eyes for a moment, only to see her blanch and glance away. Old anger made his nostrils flare. He smoothed it down without much effort, though. At the Sanctuary, he had at last come to terms with his extreme rage, a result of enduring the bite so young, and learned not to be afraid of it. There were many socially acceptable ways to vent it.

Like taking points, for instance.

"Fifteen points from Ravenclaw for insolence to a professor," he said mildly, and saw Turtledove's eyes widen. Ravenclaw was already

almost in negative points, though Trelawney still awarded points, unaffected by what was happening in the school, and Sinistra took pity where she could. “Now, I want to know what you were doing following Harry. Didn’t that teach you anything?” He nodded at her reddened face. None of the professors had been able to remove the curse, though everyone but Remus, Acies, and Severus had tried. They’d concluded that the end of the sunburn would have to wait for the end of Harry’s anger at her.

“He can’t—” said Turtledove, and ducked her head. Her voice came out muffled. Remus sniffed delicately, and then raised an eyebrow. She was on the verge of tears. “He can’t get away with everything he’s done,” she said. “Having a s-snake in the school. Two snakes, even. Accusing the Headmaster of child abuse. Casting spells on us.” She lifted her head and stared helplessly at Remus. “He’s becoming a Dark Lord, and we’re the only ones smart enough to see and stop him. Why doesn’t anyone believe us?”

Remus studied her in silence. He didn’t think he could correct all her misconceptions about Harry, and he didn’t want to try; the prejudice against Parselmouths, for instance, was at least as old as the prejudice against snakes themselves. But he could, and he would, try to correct the most dangerous mistake she was engaged in.

“Miss Turtledove,” he said, “I can assure you that the accusations against Albus Dumbledore are true.”

“That’s impossible.”

Remus shrugged. “I discovered the truth about Harry’s home life in his second year. His parents would do nothing. I went to the Headmaster, thinking he could help, that surely he couldn’t know about what Lily and James—two of my dearest friends—were doing to their own son. He Obliviated me. I didn’t fully know what had happened until Harry restored my memories. Now, does that sound like the kind of wizard who would protect children?”

Turtledove had shrunk away from him as if he were threatening her, and she shook her head now, spasmodically. “That’s not true,” she

said. "Albus Dumbledore is a great and noble wizard. My parents told me so."

"I believe he once was a great and noble wizard," said Remus, thinking of the way he and his friends had fought in the First War, about what kind of leader Dumbledore had been then. Never faltering, perfectly suited to facing and battling a Dark Lord. Perhaps it was the decisions he'd had to make afterwards, in a time of nominal peace, that had started him down the long path to his fall.

"But he's just—he's the Light Lord," Turtledove tried. "Can't you see? If we don't follow him, we'll have no chance at all. The Light will lose to the Dark. We'll all become slaves of You-Know-Who. He's our only savior, and they've imprisoned him on the word of another Dark Lord!"

Her eyes were wide, white with the fear that had eaten her reason. Remus supposed that Dumbledore's spell might have increased it, and perhaps lingering traces of the web were hurting her even now. But it had been there when she came into the school. Her parents had pumped poison into her ears, and he had no idea how to purge it.

But he could, perhaps, frighten her off from attacking Harry.

"Miss Turtledove," he said, "in addition to the permission he's received to use his magic, Harry has magical creatures defending him. The phoenix would rather weep for you than burn you, I believe, and the Omen snake could at best break your wrist. But the Many cobra would kill you."

"And you let him walk around with that thing around his neck?" Turtledove exclaimed.

Remus inclined his head, and let his lips lift from his teeth, just slightly. Turtledove immediately pulled back.

"We must," said Remus, "because we can guarantee him no safety otherwise, and because we would prefer not to irritate the Many hive cobras. They have accepted him as their vates, Miss Turtledove. Do you know what that word means?"

"A singer," she whispered. "A seer."

Remus nodded encouragingly. "Harry is trying to see paths clear to freedom for the magical creatures which won't endanger them, or wizards, or other kinds of magical creatures. He's freed a few species, but there are many, many species still to go, and other groups of the same species. That means that he's committed to a duty and task that might take longer than his life. And the magical creatures know that, and will protect him. Even if we tried, we don't have the right to dictate their wills any longer, since Harry won't let us have that. So we can't restrain the Many snake if you attack Harry and it bites you. Stay away from him."

Turtledove frowned at him. "Is that the reason you like him so much? Protect him? Because you're a werewolf, and he's vates to you, too?"

Remus smiled. He wasn't about to tell her that his wolf was itself a web, a disease, that spent its time hating and longing for blood, and especially hated Harry. He did have hope that Harry might be vates for them someday, breaking the webs, and so her statement was, in a sense, true.

"Yes," he said, and let his teeth flash at her again.

"I could tell," she whispered. "I could tell that you threatened me."

"And the Headmistress would ask why, and then I would tell her why, and you would, perhaps, be expelled," said Remus pleasantly. He had been witness to an amusing little scene on Saturday of Minerva swearing that she would expel half of Ravenclaw, if that was what it took to get the truth through the little brats' heads. "And I think, for that threat, that you've earned yourself another week of detention, Miss Turtledove."

She turned away from him with a sulky mutter of, "Yes, Professor."

Remus let her go. He was not entirely sure that she would obey him. She might attack Harry again, there was always the chance, and this time she would end up blind or dead.

Remus found it hard to worry too much about that possible outcome. Another thing he'd learned in the Sanctuary was to fully embrace and use the few good things that being a werewolf gave him. His keener senses were one of those things, and another was a greater sense of what it meant to be free, instead of wild. Sooner or later, one had to give up on warnings. If another person was determined to run headlong off a cliff, and you'd tried yelling and threatening and persuasion and everything short of force...

Well, she had to be free to make the choice that would shatter her head.

Remus knew better than any fully human witch or wizard exactly what Harry was, what he represented. His muttering and snarling wolf wouldn't let him forget. That meant he valued Harry's life more highly than that of a random Ravenclaw who seemed determined to jump. Remus would lie in the sun and watch her take a run at it, at this point.

He turned and went back to his office, where he had letters waiting for him from Claudia Griffinsnest, Delilah Gloryflower, and Hawthorn Parkinson. They were interested in trying to build a pack, though they didn't know how as yet. They also didn't know why they missed Fergus Opalline so much, and had turned to him for help on that.

Remus wasn't a wandering werewolf, but he had contacts among those who were. He knew some of the refugees, and he knew some of the odd accommodations they'd made to live with their wolf natures and their utterly unexpected demands. The wolves were dark and sang of blood and hatred and sweet flesh on every day that didn't contain a full moon, but they also approved of other werewolves, and had a kinship with them. It was best that their human hosts obey those impulses, where they weren't destructive, and build the packs, and allow themselves to mourn when one of them died—not for a brother, not for a friend, but for a packmate.

He would share those secrets with other werewolves, because they needed them. No human but Harry was welcome to them. And that meant that no human but Harry—and only Harry if he asked—would know that there was a fourth letter currently on Remus's desk, too,

from a werewolf who had managed to secure a job in the Ministry and keep it, undetected.

“—Bell scores! Ten points to Gryffindor!”

Harry wheeled on his Firebolt and peered over his shoulder, just in time to see Katie Bell rise triumphantly, dodging around an attack by one of the Slytherin Beaters as if she didn't even notice him. A moment later, the Weasley twins united in an attack on the Slytherin Chasers, forcing the Beaters to pay attention to them instead. Harry shook his head. The Gryffindor team was playing brilliantly, while the Slytherin team seemed completely disorganized today. Probably all the lost sleep from guarding me, he thought sardonically.

He lifted his head, scanning restlessly for the Snitch, forcing himself to ignore Zacharias's announcement of another ten points to Gryffindor. If he could catch the Snitch now, he could still win Slytherin the game. Gryffindor wasn't yet that far ahead.

He saw Connor looping lazy patterns a short distance from him, head turning from side to side. Then he abruptly jerked in the direction of one of his glances, stared a short time more, and began to fall.

Harry knew his brother's tactics, though. This was a feint. Connor just wanted to trick Harry into diving after him, in the hopes that he would be caught near the ground and a further distance from the Snitch when it did show up.

The little golden ball was still nowhere in sight, and it could still be anyone's game.

Harry heard a Slytherin goal being announced from below with more panache than it probably deserved. He heard the slight whistle that he knew was Connor returning from the ground, disgruntled that he hadn't managed to fool Harry. And then he saw the Snitch blazing above his head.

Harry leaned forward, legs and hand locking around the broom handle. His mind was very clear, less urgent than it had ever been

while he was playing Quidditch. He had figured out the probable end of this game before he entered the air.

The speed of his Firebolt would get him to the Snitch faster than Connor could reach it. But Harry had an enormous disadvantage now: the loss of one hand, which meant that he would have to hold onto the broom with his knees alone in order to capture the damn thing. It was a dangerous maneuver. A gust of wind could send him to the ground. A sudden dodge from the Snitch could lose it for him altogether.

Connor gave a small gasp behind him, and then Harry heard him flying upward, urging his broom on with short whoops. Harry locked his gaze on the Snitch and refused to look at his brother.

Dart and shimmer and shimmy; the Snitch shot across the sky, trying to lose both determined Seekers. Harry climbed rapidly, getting above it. He banished the growing specter of fear from his mind. The other three times he'd played Quidditch against Gryffindor, it had seemed as though someone were trying to kill him—or Connor—but that wouldn't happen this time.

The Snitch slowed to a joggle, as though it were taunting them, or didn't think it was in much danger.

Harry came down in a slanting dive, traveling out of the sun like a hawk attacking a rabbit. Connor would be hard put to it to see him unless he shaded his eyes with one hand, and he was unlikely to remove either from the broom until he was within catching distance.

The Snitch sped up again, but Harry was ahead of Connor on a level plane now, and he knew the Firebolt was faster.

He took a deep breath and gave his broom its head.

The wind stung tears from his eyes as he flew, and joy, wild and unrestrained as the joy he'd felt when flying outside the Malfoys' house, sang in his ears. He flew, and he flew, and he flew, and then he was even with the Snitch, and the time had come to extend his hand, do or die.

He clenched his legs down and tore his hand free, reaching out.

The Snitch smacked into his palm, and Harry closed his fingers around it. He heard Zacharias roaring from below, and the stands going mad, and Connor's disappointed yelp from behind him.

Then a gust of wind caught him.

Harry slammed his hand back onto the Firebolt, clinging tightly as the world began to spin. Sky and earth rushed together and emptied themselves, then rushed together once more. Harry closed his eyes and held on so fiercely he thought he would crush the Snitch. The flutter of small wings against his palm reassured him, but only slightly.

He had to break his spin, and he only knew one way how.

He leaned backward, straining every muscle in his arm and shoulders, and stuck his left arm out for added momentum. The Firebolt shuddered, then tipped over backwards.

Harry landed with an ommph. He hadn't realized the ground was that close. He blinked at the sky, and tenderly reached up, still clutching the Snitch, to feel the back of his head. It felt as though he had a bleeding lump there. At least he'd inflicted that on himself, he thought, rather than the Lestranges or Sirius or a Dobby-controlled Bludger.

"Slytherin wins!" Zacharias announced, just in case no one had heard him the first time.

The mad cheers began again, and Harry let his teammates lift him. He grimaced in pain when they did, of course, and Felborn, the new team captain since Montague had fled, shook his head.

"Can't even have fun without putting yourself in the hospital wing, can you, Potter?" he muttered.

Harry smiled, closed his eyes, and let them say what they would. It had been wonderful, for a few hours, to forget all about anger, and all about pain.

The anger came back a few hours later, when Harry was lying in his bed in the hospital wing, with Fred Weasley on guard and joking about whether Harry shouldn't just catch Snitches with his skull from now on, and an owl soared through the window, open to the bright November air. Fred insisted on checking the letter it bore for hexes before Harry read it. When he turned the parchment lime-green, though, Harry rolled his eyes and snatched it from him.

He stared at the first few lines, and felt his blood turn cold, and then burning hot, and then like acid, which was an interesting array of sensations. He looked sideways, and saw Fred sitting up, his eyes fixed on Harry's face.

"Something up?" Fred asked softly.

"I think so." Harry scanned the letter one more time, to be sure, and then nodded. "Yes. This is from the person who impersonated me and sent the pictures to the Daily Prophet." Only she hadn't exactly impersonated him, he found as he read further, but that was beside the point, and anyway, the truth only fueled his anger. "She wrote me intending to blackmail me, and she promises that she'll reveal Argus Veritaserum's identity, too, if I just do what she wants."

He turned and looked at Fred. "Could you fetch me two pieces of parchment and a quill, please?" he asked. "And go to the Owlery and tell Hedwig I want her. Oh, and a school owl."

Fred stood up, grinning, that smile that was a mixture of amusement and a predator's bared teeth. "You're writing two letters back to her?"

"No," said Harry, feeling his own mouth stretch in a wider line as his anger roared up to new heights. "One to her. The other goes to the Isle of Man."

Interlude: A Kindled Soul

November 4th, 1995

Dear Mr. Potter:

I did hope that I could speak to you less openly than this. I dreamed of a chase, a hunt, of luring you through numerous deceptive passages.

As it is, I think I should come right out and speak more frankly. I am the one who sent the pictures to the Daily Prophet. I am the one who gave my daughter Polyjuice and had her impersonate you. I admit it. It is a good thing to have a clean conscience at last, though nowhere near as comfortable as someone like you would proclaim it.

And why admit this? Why give my enemy such information so freely?

Three reasons, Mr. Potter. The first is that I know who Argus Veritaserum is and where he resides. I gave him the pictures, never dreaming he would do as he has done with them. They were intended to be blackmail, a subtle threat to hold over your head—not splashed on the front page of that wretched rag of a newspaper. I am perfectly willing to give him up to you. He has trespassed on my patience, and on yours, for long enough.

The second reason is the motive behind my betrayal. A test, a trip of the wire to see how you would respond. I cannot follow any but the strongest Lords, Mr. Potter. I thought you were strong after the night of the attack on Woodhouse, but then you wept over the body of a fallen comrade, giving a prime opportunity for someone to strike at you—and you had to be saved in the first place, because you were not paying attention to your surroundings. I was not convinced that your sacrificial instincts were given up. I continued to wait and watch.

Your response to the articles and to the Death Eater activity within Hogwarts has at last satisfied me. I am willing to give you Argus Veritaserum, and the photographs still in my possession, and my promise that such a test shall never happen again.

The third reason is my daughter, Edith. I have found, to my dismay, that she has become uncontrollable, and I fear that she may have encountered those at Beauxbatons who encouraged her to become intimate with French contacts of the Dark Lord. She has a spell on her that I cannot identify, and cannot break. I can only confine her to her room. If you are unconvinced of my loyalty—and why would you be convinced of it?—I am willing to trade you everything I have already mentioned for your help in curing Edith. She is my magical heir, and I love her dearly.

Can you come to me no later than next Friday, the 10th, and help me with these problems?

I await your owl.

Sincerely,

Henrietta Bulstrode.

November 4th, 1995

Dear Mrs. Bulstrode:

For reasons of my own, I am accepting your offer. I will meet you on the 10th, at noon, if you will owl me with Apparition coordinates for your estate. In the meantime, please make sure that Edith gets plenty of rest, good food, and gentle care, and give her my warmest regards. One cannot be too careful with unknown spells.

Harry Potter.

November 4th, 1995

Dear Paton Opalline:

Once, sir, a month ago, you came to me and offered me your family's help, the alliance of the Old Blood. I have particular need of one thing

you offered me then. Will you firecall me when you receive this owl? You need only speak of the fireplace at Hogwarts Hospital Wing when you toss the Floo powder into the flames. I will be waiting by the hearth at any hour in the afternoon on Sunday, which I calculate is the earliest time my owl can be expected to reach the Isle.

Your ally,

Harry Potter.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Ascent and Assent

Harry reflected that it was very tolerant of McGonagall to allow them to keep meeting in the Room of Requirement. He didn't know any other area on Hogwarts grounds that would be large enough to contain so many of his allies comfortably, and without requiring the ones who didn't like each other to sit next to each other. Of course, the Headmistress probably didn't trust them completely, since she was sitting in with them as usual, but it was still generous of her.

You're putting off what you know you need to do.

Harry sighed, and tugged his scattered thoughts together, in a direction that would lead them away from generosity. He straightened from his slump against the wall, and Draco, who'd been standing with him, scurried over and took a seat. Harry met the eyes of the people he'd invited here, one by one.

In truth, it was most of his allies. Elfrida Bulstrode and Laura Gloryflower he'd had to leave out, because their puellaris vows would compel them to do unfortunate things when they got near Henrietta, if what Harry suspected about Edith was true. Adalrico had chosen to stay home with his wife. Claudia Griffinsnest hadn't been able to come; someone suspected that she was a werewolf, and she had to remain in sight and not do anything suspicious for a few weeks. Delilah Gloryflower would have told her aunt about the meeting, since Laura was the head of the Gloryflower family, so Harry had also had, reluctantly, to leave her at home. The decision to leave Mortimer Belville and Edward Burke uninformed had been Harry's own. He hadn't been able to contact Arabella Zabini, and he'd tried to contact Regulus, but also proven unsuccessful. Snape had answered shortly that he was having some trouble with the Ministry, and Harry had known better than to inquire further. (He'd also unwound the Many snake from his throat this morning and left her napping on his pillow).

Tybalt and John were there, though, grinning. Honoria sat beside them, her hands clasped and her eyes bright, although no smile graced her face. She seemed content to wait and see what Harry

would do. Ignifer sat beside Honoria, now and then regarding her suspiciously, though she watched Harry with a look of absolute trust.

There was an empty chair, and then the rest of Harry's allies. Charles clasped his hands behind his head, his gaze never wavering from Harry's face. Thomas had his nose buried in a book. Hawthorn and Remus were talking in low, rapid voices, though they exchanged a few last words and faced back to the front when they saw Harry waiting. The Malfoys sat at their ease, like a pair of trained gyrfalcons getting ready to swoop down on their prey, and Draco at their side. Snape was not far from them, his face for once neutral. He'd seemed more cautious, less prone to judge Harry at once, ever since he had shared the breaking of Dumbledore's web with Harry.

McGonagall sat at the far end of the line, as if she were heading the meeting, though she kept looking curiously at the empty chair behind her. Harry had deliberately asked her to keep it empty for him. She'd done so, and asked no questions. But now it was almost time to end the waiting, anyway.

Harry closed his eyes and summoned the rage that waited just under the surface of his mind, if he cared to look for it. Then it hit him like a blow, and abruptly his magic unfolded around him, snarling. He looked up to meet the considerably startled gazes of his allies. Even Thomas had been distracted from his book, something ponderous having to do with South African magic.

"How did you do that?" he demanded.

"Unfold my magic?" Harry shrugged. "It happens when I'm angry."

"What do you have to be angry about?" Charles sounded less as if he were making an intellectual inquiry than Thomas did, but his eyes were still shadowed. Harry could guess why. Harry had said only that the purpose of this meeting had something to do with Henrietta. Charles must be wondering if Harry was moving too quickly, letting rage determine his best course rather than rational thinking.

I've had a week to do the rational thinking. Harry had hammered out a plan that pleased him, in a hard-edged way. And the only one

whose help he needed to perform it was Paton Opalline's. The rest of his allies were here to learn why he was doing this to Henrietta, to observe...

And take away a lesson. Harry didn't know if the traitor was here today, but if he was, then Harry wanted him sweating.

"Henrietta Bulstrode," he said simply. That snared the complete attention of anyone whose mind might have been wandering before, judging by the way that a few of them leaned forward. "She sent me a letter on Saturday claiming responsibility for the pictures of me smashing Augurey chicks that reached the front page of the Daily Prophet. She said it was part of a blackmail attempt that should never have reached the public. She promised to give me Argus Veritaserum, the rest of the pictures, and her complete loyalty if I would simply come to her and free her daughter, Edith, whom she claims is under a spell of some kind."

"If she's under a spell, it would only be one that Henrietta put there," said Ignifer, eyes lighting. "I hate that woman."

"I know that," said Harry calmly. "And I have help in dealing with that aspect of things." He turned to face the door of the Room of Requirement. "You can come in now, sir."

Paton Opalline entered. He'd dropped the glamour since he arrived at the school yesterday to talk to Harry and finalize the details of their plan. His tattoos swirled and danced across his body, pulsing with threads of gold and red light quite separate from the inked lines themselves. Harry wondered what that meant, but didn't ask. He was too busy watching the expressions on the faces of his allies as they stared at Paton.

Almost all of them looked contemptuous. Honoria and Thomas were the only exceptions, Honoria for looking as if she would burst out laughing and Thomas for his wide-eyed fascination; Harry half-expected him to murmur something along the lines of, "Oooh, pretty."

As I thought, then. Most of them must despise the Old Blood because they won't kill. That means that they cannot have a part in the plan I

put together today, even if they want it. Harry was more grateful than ever that Henrietta's letter had arrived when he was alone except for Fred Weasley, and that Fred had thought it a grand joke to arrange everything in secret, even getting Madam Pomfrey out of the hospital wing on Sunday so that Harry could talk to Paton in private. Draco and Snape would no doubt have insisted on killing Henrietta right away.

And that is stupid. She needs to be dealt with. Killing is not dealing with her. It sends no message to the traitor. And I have only some rights over her. There is one who has more.

"If you would sit down, sir," said Harry, nodding Paton to the empty seat next to McGonagall. Paton ambled over and did as he was told, eyes bright as he took in the gazes of everyone watching him. Harry supposed he must be used to the scorn. He had told Harry that most Light families despised his own for refusing to take part in Ministry politics and accumulate wealth; Merlin knew what the Dark families would think.

"Ah," said Lucius, his voice low and hard. "It's the breeder who makes the Weasleys look sane."

"It is true that I have nine children, Malfoy, and had ten until recently, until Fergus died," said Paton, without hesitation, touch his mourning-cropped hair.

Lucius's lip curled, and it seemed as if he would say something else, but Harry said, "Mr. Malfoy, I will not hear any further insults from you."

Lucius blinked and stared at Harry for a split second before he wiped his face clean. Such staring was a weakness in the pureblood dances, a sign that the dancer had been taken by surprise. Lucius wouldn't want to show that off. He turned his head away instead, the slightest bit.

"As you wish, Mr. Potter," he murmured.

“I do wish.” Harry unfolded a bit more of his own magic. It wasn’t hard, not with the rage that reminded him of the dragons’ songs, wild and oblivious to anything outside itself. “Mr. Opalline will help me convince Henrietta Bulstrode that she has gone too far against me. He will help me punish her. The rest of you are coming along as witnesses. Do not interfere.”

“You mention that this—this woman did those things to you, and you don’t want us to interfere?” Draco was almost vibrating in place on his chair. “You can’t mean that, Harry.”

Harry turned and faced him. This was actually likely to be one of the hardest tests. If he could stand intimidating Draco at need, then he could face intimidating any of the others, to most of whom he had less emotional commitment.

Draco started back, and then dropped his eyes. That left a pure silence for Harry’s words to break into.

“Yes, I do wish it.” Harry surprised himself by how calm he sounded, and then realized his voice wasn’t calm. It was quiet, but harsh, like the pause before the thunder sounded. “None of you will do anything to harm Henrietta. None of you will do anything to assist me. You will watch. I wished you to know what I do to allies who turn against me like this, and who hurt innocents.”

“Her daughter’s been hurt, certainly,” said Charles, sounding a bit bewildered. “But who else?”

Harry stared at him. Did the man miss that article altogether? “The Augurey chicks.”

Charles nodded, but Harry could see that he didn’t really understand. His own wild contempt grew in him, and he had to stamp down on it. Most wizards still didn’t understand the way Harry saw magical creatures, whether or not they were ever likely to be useful allies to him in war. They existed. That gave them the right to any freedom and possibility they could have that didn’t trample on others’ freedom and possibilities. And it meant that Harry despised wizards and witches who hurt them just because.

“You’ve made me your leader,” he said. “Supposedly.” His gaze cracked from face to face, searching for the slightest sign of disobedience or boredom. “And most of the time, I’ll welcome your questioning, your strategies, your eagerness to challenge me and have some things your own way. Not this time. If you cannot consent to come with me and stay in the background, I’ll leave you in the Room of Requirement until I’m done.” With the Headmistress of Hogwarts on one’s side, one could do things like that.

One by one, everyone involved bowed their heads, or their necks, or gave another sign that they wouldn’t challenge him. Harry held a staring contest with Snape for several minutes until he seemed to realize that he was making Harry look bad, and consented with a sneer.

Harry turned and caught Paton’s eye. “Let’s go,” he said.

Paton smiled, and the red and gold lines racing over his tattoos animated further, covering his shoulders and white-blond hair in a dancing haze. “Let’s.”

Henrietta paused in her pacing and her humming to caress Edith’s hair. Her daughter huddled away from her as much as the large chair she sat in would allow.

“Ah-ah-ah,” said Henrietta chidingly.

Edith froze, and sat still. Henrietta stroked her hair and scratched under her chin, smiling at the spell around her daughter’s throat all the while. It looked like a hooked collar of white and green light. Potter would be concerned the moment he saw it, of course, and he would not recognize it, because it wasn’t a spell that existed outside Henrietta’s branch of the Bulstrode family. He’d try to break it, though. Even if he didn’t completely believe her letter—and he would have been a fool to do so, not worthy of being Henrietta’s tool—then concern for Edith would bring him along. And once he saw that Edith wore this kind of spell, then it wouldn’t matter if he thought the caster was Henrietta or Voldemort himself. He would still want to free her.

And his interference, any break he put into the spell, would damage Edith's mind. It was damage that would heal in a year or two, of course, but Henrietta didn't intend to tell him that. What mattered was that in his guilt, he would consent to do anything she asked. Henrietta knew his psychology. She had only to get her teeth into him and watch him twist in her jaws.

He'd said that he was coming alone when she sent him the letter with the Apparition coordinates. Henrietta was not worried if he did come with someone else. She was the strongest of his allies with the exception of Severus Snape, and she was on her own territory. She had several rune circles prepared, and nastier spells and traps, just in case Potter decided to be...uncooperative.

She and Edith were waiting in the main library, a large room on the ground floor with windows that appeared on whatever wall the most light was currently coming from, tracking the sun throughout the day until it sank. Then they vanished, and candles appeared. Right now, they were evenly distributed throughout the room, and admitted more than enough illumination to let Henrietta make out the tears on her daughter's cheeks. She only voiced a tiny whimper when her mother stroked her hair this time, but that was all right. Henrietta could take pleasure in delicate sensations as well as the kind of complete surrender that she expected to have from Potter in a few minutes.

She lost track of how long she stood there. The dreams of the future were brighter and more vivid than the reality surrounding her.

Then her wards were destroyed.

Henrietta reeled, every alarm that her home possessed ringing in her ears, shrieking in her skull from the mental ties, and making her bones shake as they were spelled to do in case she was in such a deep sleep she didn't hear them. She stared up, gasping, tears flooding her eyes, and trying to determine what had happened.

Her wards were—gone. When she reached out to them, nothing was there. They'd been smashed as effectively as if a manticores had taken its tail to planes of ivory. Henrietta shook her head, dazed. There must be something still there. Each ward had a homing spell at

the very bottom of its multiple layers; if someone did manage to destroy all the other spells that made them up, then the shards would sink into the ground and flow back to her. She should be tingling with magical power right about now from the remnants of all the wards on her house, and she was not.

Then her nose began abruptly to burn. It smelled as though the mother of all thunderstorms were rolling in.

Either a storm like that was coming, one that would make the Augureys shriek themselves hoarse in foretelling it—

Or she had an enraged Lord on her doorstep.

Henrietta scrambled up. She hadn't thought it would come to this, ever. Potter had the power of a Lord, but his will was chained from using it. He was too soft, too delicate, and thought too much about stepping on toes. Henrietta had been certain she could control him because he had left the halter of kindness on his neck with the reins dangling for anyone who wanted to do so.

It seems I was wrong.

But she could still adapt, and survive. She was a Slytherin, and a Slytherin always had a backup plan. She turned and walked swiftly across the room, though she still shook from the impact of the wards' razing, and stepped into the circle composed of rune blocks on the floor near the furthest bookshelves. The circle shuddered slightly, and then closed around her. The markings shone silver and gold, a subtle shimmer of power. Henrietta took a deep breath, and felt her panic calming and some extra magic flowing into her. She'd split off a piece of her power long ago, but instead of binding it into one object, like a sword or a staff, the way the majority of wizards and witches did, she'd bound it into these rune blocks. Broken apart and scattered, they each carried only a trapped grain of magic, one that couldn't be released without the presence of its fellows. Together, they gave her back nearly everything.

Henrietta snarled softly and pushed her fingers through her thick brown hair, shoving it back from her face. If he wants a battle, then

he'll have a battle. I shouldn't have to fight him, he should yield the moment he sees the spell around Edith's neck, but he might strike at me before he sees it.

Reassured, she drew her wand and gestured at the door into the library. "Findo extos," she murmured. A shimmering line of silver power raced across the doorway, coiling close to the floor. Henrietta smiled slightly. This was a nastier version of the Entrail-Expelling Curse, one that struck from the inside only. Potter wouldn't see that, and it would trip him up a bit when his viscera began abruptly to divide into smaller and smaller pieces. He'd manage to overcome it, of course, but Henrietta would use the extra moments to make him observe the spell around Edith's neck. And she should have even longer than the spell would ordinarily win her, because, since Potter's experience with the Entrail-Expelling Curse itself, he should have a panic reaction to anything that felt even a little like that. She'd have those few extra seconds.

She congratulated herself, and was just striding across the library to stand beside Edith's chair again when she felt another presence enter the room with her.

Henrietta turned at once, wand in hand. So perhaps Potter's Apparated into the library. He shouldn't have been able to, not when he didn't know what it looked like, but Lords could do things other wizards could not. That was all right. She had spells that could take care of that, too.

The silver spell she'd placed against the doorway snapped, unraveled, and trailed out like entrails itself, yanked down an invisible maw. Then the faint shine of some of the books on the shelves stopped, and then a few of the trap spells that Henrietta had placed on the walls, and then another rune circle, gleaming unobtrusively in the corner.

Fuck. Henrietta's heart pounded erratically. Potter had sent that damn magic-eating ability of his ahead of him, and it was even more unnerving to watch her own power vanishing into thin air than it was to see Potter gnawing and ripping it away from Voldemort.

She wouldn't allow that ability to touch her. She wouldn't. She was not about to lose her magic. Her magic, along with the strength of her will, was what exalted her and made her different than the other people who surrounded her. She would rather die than lose her magic.

She aimed her wand at where the front edge of that loss of magic must be, given the vanishing lights, and murmured, "Permuto," throwing all her will behind the incantation.

The magic-eating ability should have changed completely, become magic, and then allowed her to recapture and command any power she'd lost again. Instead, her own spell whistled down the invisible thing's gullet, and Henrietta felt fear stirring in her like some forest creature she'd crushed.

Then the walls around her buckled. Henrietta whipped about, hearing Edith shriek from her chair, and saw the magical windows enlarging until they made the entire room transparent. She could easily see her own lawn now, mantled with sunshine and desiccated leaves.

And covered with wizards and witches, with Potter in front of them. At his side stood a single wizard with messy white-blond hair and a stern, direct gaze. His skin bristled with tattoos.

The look in Potter's eyes made Henrietta know terror for the first time in thirteen years, when she'd thought she might die in childbirth. She knew he would be well-protected, and that she shouldn't try to hex him. But the man beside him was fair game, and he didn't even have a shield.

She aimed her wand at him and didn't speak the spell aloud, simply letting it fly and crash through her window. The idiot shouldn't be able to resist it, especially since he looked like a Light wizard, the kind that didn't fight. Potter, intent on swallowing her magic, glugged with it, shouldn't notice in time to stop it.

Potter, indeed, did not react, but the Light wizard did. Smiling, he lifted one arm, and the red and gold shimmer around his skin grew suddenly thick, into a shield that repelled the curse without a sound. It

soared high and shattered harmlessly into the air, scattering scarlet sparks down on Henrietta's erstwhile allies.

Henrietta snarled as she remembered what those tattoos meant. Old Blood. Holding money in common, blood in common—and magic in common. He can draw on the magic of all his family members at once if he needs to. Some kind of damn reservoir, they are. Shit.

“Henrietta.”

She shuddered, and told herself that it wasn't power that compelled her to look. Potter wouldn't do that, whatever else she thought of him. Her head snapped around anyway, though, and she locked eyes with the fifteen-year-old boy she would never have thought could frighten her as he did now.

He has the ability to eat magic. Where does it end? He could swallow the entire wizarding population of Britain if he wanted, and then the rest of Europe, and then the world. If he wanted. What keeps that in check? A set of morals? What if he gets tired of them?

She understood, now, with exquisite clarity, why Albus Dumbledore had tried to enslave Harry Potter when he was still a child, not young enough to have a will of his own.

Potter took two steps forward. His eyes were as brilliant a green as life. “Where is your daughter?”

And Henrietta felt hope bloom in her heart like a fever, though she fought hard to keep it from infecting her expression. She was good at that, though. All Slytherins were. “In the library,” she said, tonelessly, and stepped out of the way, bowing her head. She knew that she couldn't strike back at Potter right now. He would only eat her magic.

She had to watch, and wait, for a time. If she was right, the best time ought to be in a few moments, when Potter tried to break the spell, damaged Edith's mind, and was torn apart by his guilt and sorrow.

She watched from beneath lowered eyelids as Potter Vanished the glass in the window, and he and the Light wizard walked across the

library to Edith. The shield around her went away when Potter looked at it, of course, and then he leaned forward and stared at the hooked spell on her neck.

Henrietta tensed, waiting for the moment when he would try to break it.

Instead, Potter stepped aside and said, "Paton."

The Light wizard closed his eyes and clasped his hands together. "We have kept the vows of the Old Blood," he said. It sounded like a prayer. "We have not killed save in defense of our own, we have not sought power, we have not sought vengeance. We have not cast any of our blood out to die, though they were born powerless. We have shared the good things in life, and sought to diminish evil by sharing as well. Here, in the name of a child whose mother has hurt her, by the will of a family who finds that abhorrent and has since the dawn of their days, I ask the Light's help, in the name of the Light. Fiat lux, lux aeterna!"

Light blossomed from between his hands, a white spark so bright that Henrietta's eyes watered and she wanted to look away. But some compulsion kept her in place, staring, the same one that had made her look at Potter. She had to watch as the Light wizard's hands fell open like the petals of an unfolding flower and the spark breathed out over them, so brilliant, so mighty, so different from the Dark Henrietta had served all her life that she trembled in hatred and unwilling awe.

The Light moved to trail a rope of fire like burning magnesium from the wizard's hands to the spell around Edith's neck. It traced the barbed hook of it, and then there came a noise like a sigh, and Henrietta thought she heard a song, sung in high, piercing, ecstatic voices, compounded of joy that would break her mind if she understood it, of leaping flames, of leaping light, light, and light, and light once again—

And then the moment was gone, and the trail of fire fell away from Edith's neck, and the spell fell away with it, the spell that no one outside the Bulstrode family should have known or been able to break.

Trust Potter to find the one ally who could, Henrietta thought, her bitterness drowning her alive.

“So ever the Light doth shine against the Dark,” the wizard said softly, and closed his eyes, some of the joy Henrietta had heard in his face.

Potter knelt down in front of Edith and said, in a voice that should not have come from a Lord’s mouth because it was too gentle, “Edith? You get to make your own decisions now.”

Henrietta heard a rustle of robes behind her, and knew that Potter’s allies had arrived. She didn’t turn to look at them. She was too busy watching Potter talk to her daughter, and knowing that her daughter would condemn her to death. It was what Henrietta would have done in her place.

Edith made a small, frightened sound. Potter must have heard a question, because he said, “Because I know what it’s like, Edith. My parents hurt me, though doubtless not in the same ways. Neither of them was as clever as your mother.” He said “clever” like it was an insult, and he turned his head.

Henrietta changed her mind when she met his eyes again. Death, even one made to repay her daughter for the humiliation Henrietta had put her through, must be better than living and suffering at Potter’s hands.

Edith uncurled a bit, and whispered something to Potter. Potter’s head snapped back around at once, and his hand rose and hovered gently over her shoulder.

“Because no one gave me a choice,” he said. “No one cared what I wanted, how I wanted my parents to be punished, or not punished, for what they did to me.” Henrietta wished she could turn her head and see how those words slammed home like a spear in Snape, who had betrayed Potter’s parents to the Ministry, but she had lost the power of movement. “Yes, your mother’s done evil to me, but she’s done more to you. Yours is the right of justice, if you wish to take it. Paton can teach you spells that right the wrongs done to you, but only you can use them.”

Henrietta felt a deep coil of loathing pinch her guts. Why didn't my ancestors take the precaution of eliminating the Old Blood? They should have.

Edith took a deep breath, and then sat up and shook her head. For the first time, her voice was audible enough to be heard by the rest of the room. "No. I don't want her killed. I don't want anything to do with her, not ever again. I don't want to see her again. I don't want people to know in the newspapers, the way they did with your parents. I just—can you take me back with you, to Hogwarts? Then I'll know she can't touch me, if I'm near you."

Grudgingly, Henrietta had to admire her daughter's ploy. It was the only way that would insure Edith was absolutely safe from her mother's anger, to live in the same place a Lord lived.

"Of course, Edith," said Harry softly. He looked at Paton. "Can you lead her out of here, Paton? I don't think she should see the rest of this."

The Light wizard knelt and extended his own hand. Edith trustingly reached out to him, and the Light wizard pulled her into his arms. Edith didn't protest, though Henrietta had never known her daughter to like being held since she was two years old. She closed her eyes and clung tight as they passed Henrietta, so that she didn't have to look at her mother.

Henrietta couldn't watch her for long. Potter had taken a step forward, and was staring at her, and it was impossible to look at anything else when his eyes blazed like that.

"Henrietta Bulstrode," said Potter softly. "I don't intend to kill you, since your daughter doesn't want you dead. But I intend to bind you, so that you can never hurt me again, and will make up for the hurt you have done me."

Henrietta felt a bit of her confidence return. Potter was too soft-hearted to do the things that would really assure her compliance, and if he took her magic, then she couldn't help him in any way. It was

beginning to seem as if he wouldn't punish her enough, and then, in a year or two, she could at least try to get some of her own back.

Potter looked sideways, at his allies. "Professor Snape," he said. "Will you be our Bonder?"

The confidence froze again. Henrietta narrowed her eyes. No. He cannot mean—no.

"Gladly," said Snape, and strode forward. Henrietta could feel his magic flexing its claws, and knew how badly he wanted to kill her. But he kept it under control, following this child-Lord with as much obedience as if he were Voldemort himself.

And still Henrietta thought he could not mean it, because Potter hated all forms of compulsion. "What do you mean to have him do with that thing, Potter?" she asked, nodding at Snape's wand.

"Bond us," said Potter. "You are going to make me two Unbreakable Vows today, Henrietta." He knelt and extended his hand.

Henrietta knew there was no way out of an Unbreakable Vow—intimately, since several books in her library concerned her ancestors' attempts to find a way around it. If she broke one of its clauses, then she would die. It was a simple matter, and it was a chain that she had never thought Potter would use.

"No," she said.

Potter looked up at her. "You will agree to it," he said calmly, "or I will drain all of your magic, including all of your magical artifacts, and your rune circles, and I'll break your wand. I can still get the help I intend to demand from you with your money. Kneel, Henrietta."

This was impossible. Impossible that she could have lost, impossible that she could have been caught against the wall with no backup plan.

But if the choices were between taking the Vows and loss of her magic, Henrietta knew which one she would embrace. Besides, there was the fact that Potter still was what he was, someone raised to be

rotted with compassion from the inside out, like a blight. His demands might be easier to live with than he imagined they would be at the moment.

Henrietta took a deep breath and knelt, reaching out to clasp Potter's hand. It would have been gratifying to find that it was hot, or sweaty, like her own, but it was cool. Potter turned and looked up at Snape, who held his wand at the ready and was murmuring the incantation for the Vow.

"Do you, Henrietta Bulstrode," Potter asked, "swear never to hurt your daughter, Edith Bulstrode, again, by magic, by word, by deed, by conspiracy, or by indirect action through another person?"

Henrietta felt herself relax. She ought not to have worried. She was accustomed to Potter's ways. Of course he would seek safety and protection for someone other than himself. And Henrietta could always have other children, though she would miss Edith's perfect obedience.

"I do swear it," she answered.

A line of fire shot out from Snape's wand and encircled her and Potter's joined hands. Henrietta shivered. It felt as heavy as a chain. She hated it. But she could live with it.

"Do you, Henrietta Bulstrode," asked Potter, his eyes on her again and steady as steel, "swear never to hurt your husband, Tertian Bulstrode, again, by magic, by word, by deed, by conspiracy, or by indirect action through another person?"

Henrietta blinked. He cares about Tertian? But then, this is Potter. He cares about everybody.

"I do so swear."

A second line of fire, a second chain, and Henrietta barely kept herself from wriggling. It was disgusting, that she, a free pureblood witch with the magic and position to enforce her will, should be bound like this. But needs must. And the third clause would probably be one

of safety and protection, too. Henrietta wondered if he would forbid her from going after his allies.

“Do you, Henrietta Bulstrode, swear never to hurt me, Harry Potter, again, by magic, by word, by deed, by conspiracy, or by indirect action through another person?”

Henrietta was quite tired of freezing, but it seemed that she could not have no other reaction when Potter said something so extraordinary. She stared at him, at his serious face, and listened to the words that would destroy any chance of her ever taking vengeance on him in the future.

Wouldn't it be better to die than accept this loss of freedom?

But, no, no, it wouldn't. A miserable life was better than a proud death, however she might have felt in the heat of the moment. Every Slytherin knew that.

It was hard, but Henrietta subdued her pride, and said, “I do so swear.”

The third line of fire joined the other two, and then all three vanished. Henrietta shook her free hand. It felt as though the chains were still encircling her body, constricting her when she tried to stretch muscles she hadn't known she had, hemming her into a smaller circle of life.

I hate this.

And there was a second one to get through. Henrietta supposed the first thing Potter would ask for was the safety of his allies.

He did not. Instead, Potter said, “Do you, Henrietta Bulstrode, swear to use half your wealth to build a sanctuary for nesting Augurey birds, to take an active interest in this sanctuary and to promote the welfare of the species, and to offer an apology for the chicks you caused to be murdered in the presence of my phoenix, Fawkes, that he might translate it for them?”

This is ridiculous. Henrietta shook her head, not in refusal, but in bewilderment. "Why do you care so much, Potter?" she asked. "It isn't even as though Augureys can speak, like centaurs or merfolk."

"Do you so swear?"

Henrietta closed her eyes. Half her wealth gone. Potter had netted her neatly there, not even specifying "money," and thus obliging her to give up valuable magical artifacts and gems as well as coins.

"I do so swear," she whispered.

"Do you, Henrietta Bulstrode, swear to leave the rest of your wealth to your daughter and magical heir, Edith Bulstrode, for her use and support and enjoyment, until and unless she clearly expresses that she does not desire it?"

Caught there, too. Henrietta opened her eyes and stared bleakly at Potter. He's determined to take away every freedom that I might have had.

"I do so swear," she said, because what else was there to do? She found she couldn't look at the second line of fire as it joined the first.

Potter leaned nearer. His eyes seemed to fill the whole of the world.

"Do you, Henrietta Bulstrode," said the horrible voice, "swear never to use your magic again, except at my express command, and then only in the form of those spells I tell you are yours to use?"

It was the final assault. It was the final indignity. It was the strike that ripped through Henrietta's tangled ambitions and finally showed her the truth of matters, how they stood, that she was never going to be able to fight against Potter and had to give up her dreams of a future vengeance.

She bowed her head. The world was very harsh around her, sunlit, and not because of the Vanished windows.

And yet, somehow, it was fitting. She had fought, and lost. She had made backup plans, and they had not been strong enough. She had made stupid mistakes, and thus she deserved to lose.

She had been outwitted, outsmarted, thought around. And it was the only kind of defeat that she could have brought herself even marginally to accept. Being “persuaded” by half-baked philosophy, as Dumbledore would have tried, or pressed against her will to become a mindless servant, as Voldemort would have done, had done during the First War, was intolerable.

To have tried her very best and lost was something else again. And now, she did have a future, if she tried her very best in another direction, because Potter was not like those other Lords; she could see it now. The way he cared about Augureys as much as humans argued against it. He was vates, the way he had always said he was, and that meant she could trust his word.

If I must have someone in charge of my life, Henrietta thought, as she lifted her head and stared at Potter, I would rather have a vates than any Lord. He is more like the ancient Lords, the way I thought he might once be. The old legends have come to life again, and I am dwelling in the middle of one. And I can admit when I am beaten. I can give in and bow my neck.

I yield. I yield everything I am, with eyes open, to a chosen loyalty.

“I do so swear,” she said, and saw Potter’s eyes widen as the third line of fire bound them and she smiled. She knew he would be searching for clues to treachery in her gaze, some way of seeing that she was less than sincere.

He would not find them. Henrietta was sincere, this time, and she knew the peace of giving over. She’d never known it before. Any opponent she’d faced was weaker than she was, could be deceived or manipulated or tricked around. No one had ever cornered her.

Now, Potter had, and there was a sudden death of uncertainty in her life. Henrietta knew she would hate it at points in the future, but for now, it filled her with a deep calm.

I can do nothing else, so let me at least apply my mind and what other resources I might muster to the task of doing well by him, of making up for my stupidity in opposing him. And the first part of that shall be telling him Argus Veritaserum's true name.

Harry leaned forward, clutching the edge of his chair and trying not to let on how nervous he was. He was fairly sure he knew where the Sorting Hat would place Edith, but if it put her into Ravenclaw, a House hostile to him...

The Hat gave a little chuckle. "GRYFFINDOR!" it announced cheerily.

Harry leaned back and sighed in relief. Then he glanced across the Headmistress's office at Connor, who'd been irritated to be left behind at first, but placated once he understood the importance of their mission and invited to attend Edith's Sorting, along with Snape and Draco. The rest of Harry's allies had already departed, their expressions ranging from shocked to thoughtful to pleased. Paton, alone, had left with a smile, and a quiet word to Edith about her being part of the Opalline family now. If she wanted, they had relatives in the Ministry who would assist her in changing her last name.

Connor nodded at him, eyes bright and face determined. Edith would find a perfect welcome in her new House—the House Harry had thought she would go into, from the moment she picked up the courage to speak to him as she had in front of her mother and a room full of strangers. Harry knew Gryffindors weren't protective of their own in the same way as Slytherins were, but honest gentleness, and equally open snapping and snarling at anyone who tried to hurt her, were better for Edith than the unobtrusiveness with which Slytherins expressed their affection. She needed to know she was loved.

"Come on, Edith," said Connor, gently, standing and holding out his hand. Edith took the Hat off her head and stared at him uncertainly, but some of her fear melted when Connor added, "I'm Connor Potter, Harry's brother, and I'm part of Gryffindor. I don't think anyone can wait to meet you. Harry told me he thought you'd be part of our House."

That relaxed Edith, and she gave Harry a little smile, and then went out the door with Connor, who hovered protectively over her. That left Harry to face McGonagall, and Snape, and Draco.

The Headmistress, luckily, took one look at his face, and said, "Go rest, Harry. I think my questions can wait until tomorrow."

Harry nodded in relief and then turned and left the office. He heard Snape and Draco following him, but they didn't begin the interrogation until they were out of the moving staircase, knowing as well as he did that McGonagall had wards to watch and listen to people there.

The first thing Draco said was, "I don't understand why you didn't tell us," and his voice was small and hurt. Harry sighed and ran his hand through his hair. He felt hollow without the rage supporting him any more.

"Because I thought you would interfere, and insist that Henrietta should receive a harsher punishment than she got," he said honestly. "I knew you wouldn't want me to leave the punishment up to Edith."

"But she hurt you!" Draco caught his left wrist and pulled hard enough to spin him towards the wall of the corridor. Harry braced his shoulder on the stones and arched an eyebrow at his boyfriend. Draco just went on scowling. "She did deserve death, or the complete loss of her magic."

"No, she didn't," said Harry. "I wanted Edith to have first crack at her, and since she didn't want it, I bound her by the Unbreakable Vows I thought were right. And that is the end of the matter, Draco. She's bound, captured, stopped. You didn't see the look in her eyes after she took the Second Vow. I did. She handed her heart over to me on a platter, Merlin knows why. Slytherin worship of power, I suppose."

Draco stared into his eyes for a moment longer, then shook his head. "I still think you're too forgiving, Harry."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Why? Because I don't kill everyone who turns on me?"

Draco's look just got fiercer. "I have something to show you later," was all he said, and he released Harry's wrist and turned towards the dungeons. "I still have to do some research on it first."

Harry didn't bother following him. He knew Snape had a question to ask him, and he let Draco leave, and he let Snape ask.

"You still believe that my method of handling your parents and Dumbledore was wrong," said Snape, and it wasn't really a question.

Harry bared his teeth. "Yes, I do," he said. "You know why."

"I wish you could talk to me about it." And Snape really did look wistful, an expression Harry had never seen on his face before. "In lieu of that, would be willing to speak with Regulus? He expects to be free of the Ministry soon. He is clearing up the last doubts as to who he is and whether he has really abandoned his old allegiances. But in a few days—"

Harry shook his head. It was answer enough. Snape fell silent, and for a few moments they walked towards the dungeons without speaking to each other. Snape at last broke the tension with a hesitant question.

"Harry." Harry looked up at him, but didn't quit walking. "What would you have done, were you in the same situation as Miss Bulstrode?"

I know the answer, but he's not going to like it. Snape had asked for honesty, though, so he was going to get honesty.

"Able to control my fate, you mean? Able to decide for myself how many of my secrets I wanted other people to know?" Snape's eyes darkened with distress, but he didn't interrupt. "I would have done what she did," said Harry, "keeping it quiet, except that I would have used my own power to make sure my parents and Dumbledore couldn't hurt me again. And then, when I could stand to be in the same room without wanting to kill them, I would arrange visits with them, to try and help them change. If Henrietta can do it, they can."

“Henrietta Bulstrode is a Slytherin, and your parents and Dumbledore are not,” said Snape. “It makes the difference, as you have so accurately divined.” He didn’t sound angry, though, and the sarcasm was more reflex than anything else. “Harry...if you will tell me, what do you intend to do at the trial?”

Six days. My parents go to trial in six days.

“The victim is not allowed to testify for either defense or prosecution,” said Harry calmly. “And of course it would be wrong of me to use my magic on the Wizengamot, or the witnesses, compelling them to change what they will say or believe.”

“Otherwise?” Snape asked.

Harry halted and looked up at him. This was too important to make a mistake about. Snape stopped, too, and met his gaze.

“I will fight as hard as I can with the weapons permitted me,” said Harry, precisely, “words, and experience, and explanation of my memories. I will fight not to see them executed. I will fight to give them a fair trial, one not prejudiced by personal emotions. And I will fight to see them free, if it does not involve trampling on other people’s wills.”

Snape hissed as though someone had kicked him in the solar plexus. He said nothing. Harry turned and continued on to the Slytherin common room alone, though he felt Snape’s gaze on his back like a hand.

Argus Veritaserum’s real name is Homer Diggle. He’s a Muggleborn Auror. I can find him easily enough.

The distraction, for he was using it that way, only lasted for so long, and then his emotions blurred and slewed and went back to the subject of his conversation with Snape. Harry bared his teeth.

I owe everyone around me so much—for trust, for belief in me, for loyalty, for love, for their very existence that demands they be allowed to live and grow as much as possible. I am incredibly in debt to them.

But this belongs to me. This is mine. They don't understand why I'm fighting for my parents. They can't comprehend why I want to forgive them. That's all right. Let them not understand. Let them not comprehend. They're not the ones engaged in this. I want to do this, and it's mine, and it's my choice not to "talk" to someone the way Snape wants me to, and I wish it could have been handled quietly but it wasn't, and now I'm going to fight with every muscle in my body, every ounce of my will, to see them alive, and, if I can, free.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Home Truths

Rufus opened the letter cautiously. He didn't really think Harry would have sent him a letter that would explode, of course, but he was not sure that he wanted to know what was in it. None of the post he'd received in the past few days was good, though some of it was simply confusing, like the message he'd received detailing Henrietta Bulstrode's sudden burning desire to work with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures to establish an Augurey sanctuary. Rufus had simply passed it along to the appropriate people and decided not to ask.

This note was simple, but it contained words that made Rufus burn.

November 11th, 1995

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

It seems that your Aurors are not yet fully purged. I have discovered that a Muggleborn Auror, Homer Diggle, has been writing to the Daily Prophet as Argus Veritaserum. He is closely connected to Dumbledore, though almost no one knows this. I believe him to be a deep-cover member of the Order of the Phoenix, and perhaps one of a number of Muggleborn students who went to Hogwarts during my mother's years there and became interested in sacrificial ethics due to Dumbledore's teaching. He would be the one who arranged matters so that Dumbledore could cast his spell, I think. You may want to purge him now, since he is, rather unaccountably, still there.

Harry James Potter.

Rufus put the letter down and stared into space. He knew Homer Diggle, though he would not have been able to say the man was Muggleborn. He had explained to clerk after clerk that, yes, he was connected to the pureblood Light wizarding family Diggle, but his ancestors had chosen to spell their name differently due to a disagreement with the head of the family several centuries ago.

And that explains why I never thought to look for a connection between him and the Headmaster, Rufus thought grimly. I know all of

Dumbledore's allies among the Light wizards, or I thought I did. Perhaps that was another matter that would have to be investigated, though, given the pressure that the Light wizards had put on him over the past few weeks to free their leader, Rufus was fairly sure that he did recognize all of them by now.

He stepped to his door and looked out. This morning, he had two Aurors on his door. He'd noticed the change a few days ago, and hadn't commented on it. If his old comrades wanted to make sure the Minister was well-guarded, he would hardly wish to interfere with that. It might be what saved his life one day.

"Auror Wilmot," he said, since Auror Feverfew was still recovering from the burns he'd taken at Fiona's hands a few weeks ago.

Edmund Wilmot snapped to attention and glanced at him. Rufus frowned. He didn't always like the man, though it was true Wilmot did impeccable work. There was something a bit too wild in his movements, and he smiled as if he were about to bite.

"Yes, sir," said Wilmot, though, perfectly polite, so Rufus went ahead and gave him his mission.

"I need you to find where Auror Dagle is working, and bring him to me at once," said Rufus. "I have some disturbing news for him."

Wilmot's eyes lit. Rufus wondered for a moment if he could possibly know the truth, then shook his head. No, I'll be questioning Dagle myself, and probably extracting memories from him for a Pensieve. Wilmot wouldn't be so eager if Dagle knew something that could condemn him, too.

Unless Wilmot knew but Dagle didn't know...

Rufus willed the thoughts away. Caution was one thing, but he couldn't become paranoid. Cleaning up the Ministry was a bigger job than he'd thought, that was all. He watched as Wilmot bowed and hurried off.

He spent a few moments speaking with Auror Feverfew, ascertaining that his burns were healing nicely, and then went back into his office, and confronted yet another disturbing message, this time from Madam Amelia Bones. She still held her position as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and though matters had flipped, rather, so that Rufus was her supervisor rather than the other way around, she still wrote as steadily and unflappably as ever, giving suggestions for new laws and new squadrons that she thought were a good idea.

Right now, she was making two suggestions she must think had their roots in sterling good sense.

Rufus didn't like 'em.

He warily studied her first proposal. True, on the surface it sounded interesting. With Death Eater numbers building again, and the Aurors still in demand for all their regular work, it made sense to designate a squad just for the capture and tracking of Voldemort's forces. They'd had great good luck a month ago, capturing a number of Death Eaters after a battle at a valley in Wales, but they wouldn't have that again. You-Know-Who had who-knew-how-many followers by now. There were trained war wizards in other departments who were wasted behind desks. They could become the Death Eater Removal Squadron.

Rufus was remembering what it had been like when the Aurors, briefly, had been authorized to use the Unforgivables in their campaigns against the Death Eaters in the First War.

He would not see that happen to them again.

He settled for scratching, "Needs reworking," at the top, and then turning to her second suggestion. This was the one that made him uneasy about Dumbledore's spell, and how deeply it might have taken hold.

Madam Bones wanted to lay the creation of a new department before the Wizengamot. The department would have the innocuous name of

Investigation of Magical Disturbances. That could mean almost anything, from Unspeakable-like work to training for Obliviators.

What it was, as Madam Bones described it, was a means of registering and tracking Lord-level wizards. It would include monitoring children who showed signs of growing into such power eventually, so that, in the words of the proposal, “no child might ever be abused by his or her fearful guardians again.”

Rufus could translate that. So that we will never have a Harry Potter on our hands again. The main reason Harry had terrified everyone was the suddenness of his appearance. Lords built their magic steadily over a long period of time, and rumors ran before them; no one had been really surprised when Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald, and there were rumors of You-Know-Who long before he launched his first raid. The wizarding world had a chance to adapt to them, to adjust their thinking and political processes to fit around them. But no one knew what to do about Harry.

Rufus didn't like it.

He was still frowning at it when the door opened, and Wilmot escorted Homer Digne in. Digne was frowning in his turn, as though he didn't really understand what this was about. He met Rufus's eyes with what looked like honest puzzlement.

“Is something wrong with my family, sir?” he asked.

“I know that you have betrayed us,” said Rufus, seeing no need to hush things up at this point in time. “You must have let someone into Albus Dumbledore's cell, and you sent articles to the Prophet to fan the flames when you must have known you could encourage illegal conduct. What is your excuse?”

Digne's hand went for his wand. He'd always been fast, Rufus remembered, but that was part of the reason he had his own wand already out. He started to lift it.

Wilmot snaked a hand down and grabbed Digne's wrist, squeezing. The other man let out a scream as the bone shattered. He fainted

with the pain, and then sagged against the other Auror, who held him up easily.

Rufus frowned, but let it go. Yes, Wilmot was violent—it was the reason he'd never advanced—but they'd hired him in spite of that, and sometimes his unusual strength came in handy. "Take him to the cells, Edmund. You're in charge of guarding him for now."

"It will be my pleasure," said Wilmot, baring his teeth.

Rufus looked hard at him.

"Imagine," Wilmot continued, without missing a beat. "Drawing a wand on the Minister."

That didn't seem to be the reason he'd broken Diggle's arm, but Rufus let that go, too. I can't sack someone just for being odd. "Quite," he said, and then turned back to the business of deciding what to do about the more difficult business of his office, while Wilmot dragged Diggle off to the cells, whistling a merry tune.

Rufus wished his life were that uncomplicated.

Harry rolled his eyes. His correspondence with the Burkes and the Belvilles wasn't going well.

He sat in a room near the stairs up to the Owlery, biting the end of his quill until the feather went damp and matted between his teeth. The letter on the desk in front of him had gone no further than the salutation. Harry wasn't yet sure how to answer the delicate mixture of praise and threats he'd got from Compton Belville. When Harry had told him rather sharply that, yes, he did plan on allying with Muggleborns, Compton had apologized, but then asked for several magical artifacts in return for his family's alliance with Harry. All of the artifacts were Dark Arts ones mostly used in torture, though Compton had provided "alternative" uses for them.

The Burkes were, in their way, worse. Their one infallible point remained that they wanted some artifacts from the Black estates, and

other families that the Burkes had married into or descended from, but didn't carry the name of. Adelina Burke had told Harry earnestly that they could bring Ministry records to show that they did have the rights to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, to at least half the land on which Malfoy Manor currently sat, and to the Garden, the Parkinsons' estate.

"You look deep in thought, Harry. Care to share?"

Harry jumped, sending his letters flying in the wind of his motion, but luckily the semi-permanent Levitation Charm he had around him at all times scooped up the flying papers before they could hit the floor and smudge the ink that already covered them. He turned around and saw Regulus standing in the doorway—well, leaning in the doorway, because Merlin forbid he stand up straight—and smirking at him.

"Regulus." Harry relaxed. "Snape said that the Ministry was questioning you. Did they finally stop?"

"Finally," said Regulus, with a roll of his eyes. "I stunned them the first time I appeared, and they were willing to accept, temporarily, that I was who I said I was. Then I guess 'formerly dead Death Eater' on the paperwork turned a few heads, and I got hauled in for further questioning. They were most disappointed when I told them that I'd turned my back on Voldemort years ago, and couldn't tell them anything about his current activities."

"Did they treat you badly? Did they—"

"No, no," Regulus soothed him. "Just asked every question they could think of, and got me tangled up in all the paperwork they could think of. But I'm free and clear now. They know I'm a Black, that I'm loyal to you, and that I'm the legal heir to all the Black estates and properties." Abruptly, he grinned, and strode across the room to catch Harry in a hug. "Severus told me that you did something fairly spectacular yesterday. I'm sorry to have missed it."

"I didn't like having to do it," Harry said softly, leaning against Regulus and floating the quill across the room so that he could hug back without getting spit on Regulus's robes. "But if she shows loyalty,

then I can give her back her magic little by little.” He’d granted Henrietta permission to use many small spells and charms—Lumos, for example, and medical magic—but the Dark Arts only in self-defense. He’d made her Old Blood, in a way, an idea he’d had after talking with Paton. He didn’t want his allies able to kill her, but, on the other hand, he could hardly leave her free to simply curse them, either.

“I think you did the right thing.” Regulus’s hand ran soothingly through his hair, still holding him close. Then the sound of a second voice, behind him and also coming from the doorway, startled Harry again.

“When were you going to tell him I was here, Regulus? Honestly, are all Blacks born to be selfish?”

Harry’s breath caught in his throat, and he pulled away from Regulus to peer around him. “Peter?”

Peter Pettigrew smiled at him. He looked far different from the way that Harry remembered him looking, even a year ago when Harry had freed him of the last shreds of the phoenix web. His blue eyes might have shadows in them, but they could shine with light on the surface. His robes were perfectly neat and clean, and he’d lost the starveling thinness that remained from Azkaban, and there was no beard on his chin.

“Hello, Harry,” he said, and held out his arms, and Harry went to him and held him in stunned silence.

“Don’t tell me,” he said, when he had his voice back. “The Ministry was finally satisfied that you were what you said you were, too.”

“Yes,” said Peter calmly. “It took longer for me than for Regulus, of course, because they wanted evidence from me to use in Dumbledore’s trial, and they had to accept that I wasn’t guilty of the crime I’d been convicted of in the first place. At least Regulus never had the bad fortune to actually be arrested,” he said, to Regulus, who grinned at him.

"It's a matter of skill, Wormtail, not luck." Regulus sniffed. "If you'd just had the sense to change into your namesake and run when the Aurors first came after you, then you could have come and hidden in Wayhouse with me. Wouldn't you have liked spending fourteen years as a wooden rat?"

"Spare me," said Peter.

Harry closed his eyes and grinned, fighting back his own happiness to keep it from overwhelming him. It was really true, then. He could ignore what Peter had said about giving evidence for Dumbledore's trial in the flood of joy. There was one thing that bothered him, though, and built until he had to break through Regulus's and Peter's banter.

"Where are you going to live?" he asked, drawing back and looking up at Peter. "Do you need money? A house? I can—"

"Harry Potter, taking care of the wizarding world one stray rat at a time," Regulus intoned, and then laughed at him. "Honestly, Harry, did you think I'd bring him here and make you do that? He's going to stay with me. We were just going to get settled—in Cobley-by-the-Sea, I think, since it's the most comfortable. That's part of the reason we're here. I wanted you to see the place that you're going to inherit someday, and Peter wanted to talk to you."

Harry scowled. "Regulus, I told you, I'm not going to be the Black heir."

"That's all right," said Regulus. "Quite all right, really." He reached into his robe pocket and pulled out a great sheaf of paperwork, waving it at Harry. "These are the forms that I need to sign to make someone not of the Black blood, or sympathetic with my magic, a legal heir. It'll take months to get through them all and make sure I haven't forgotten a signature or a binding seal. By that time, maybe you'll be more used to the idea, hmmm?"

Harry just rolled his eyes. Let him waste his time, then. It's not going to do him any good in the end.

"I don't think I can go to Copley-by-the-Sea," he said instead, and nodded to the letters floating in obedience behind the desk. "I have important letters to write to my allies."

"Do they expect them back by a particular time today?" Peter asked.

"Well, no—"

"Then come with us," said Regulus insistently. "Both of us haven't seen you to talk to in far too long."

Well, that was true, at least. Harry looked from one face to the other and gave in. He did want to speak with them, if only to make sure they were all right, and he could use a bit of relaxation away from the letters. Maybe some hours of not thinking about them would knock something loose.

"Let me just speak with Snape," he said.

"Beautiful, aren't they?"

Harry had to blink back tears as he nodded. He wasn't sure what he'd expected of Copley-by-the-Sea—a larger Grimmauld Place, perhaps, with fewer crooning portraits and no magical singing beasts and more dust.

It wasn't like that at all. The house was built into the side of a cliff in Cornwall, and the very first thing that Harry had heard when they Apparated in was the sound of the Atlantic Ocean, falling and singing and surging hard enough to make the stone around them shake. It wasn't the North Sea that lay off the coast of the beach where he'd celebrated Midsummer, but it was water, and the sound had had the power to relax him since at least the time he'd gone swimming with the unicorns.

Everything was made of stone, and covered with sea-patterns. It had taken Harry wandering through three libraries in a row to realize that the pictures were continuous, not from one room to another but from one kind of room to another. The sitting rooms contained scenes that looked like they could come from the building of the house. The

libraries had a visual history of an alliance between wizards and merfolk. A war with those same merfolk marched in spirals like a maelstrom over the walls, ceilings, and floors of the kitchens. Harry could have spent hours just trying to read and decipher them all, but Regulus had tugged him insistently through the house, aiming for the lowest level, promising Harry all the while that he'd see something remarkable.

And so he did. The lowest level of the house was composed of caves—or maybe of rooms carved out of the backs of caves, with rock turned transparent so that one could see through into the wild waters beyond. Harry truly wasn't sure if the glassy material in front of him was enchanted rock or pure magic.

When he'd first seen the creatures the caves held, he'd protested to Regulus, "But they don't live around Britain!"

Regulus had nodded slyly at the water. "Tell that to them."

And, Harry had to admit, the hippocampi frolicking in the waves didn't seem to give a fig for what *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* said. They continued swimming and playing around each other, snaring weeds and fish out of the water to eat, drifting with their tails curled in sleep, cradling their tadpoles close to them so they could feed. They had fish tails from the waist down, like merfolk, but their heads and forequarters were those of horses. The horses' coats were green, though, or perhaps blue; it was hard to tell in the subtly tinted magical light that filled the cave and allowed Harry to see them. Their manes streamed languorously in the currents, and their hooves weren't true hooves, spreading out in small fins that enabled them to stroke the water more efficiently. Harry caught a glimpse of two tadpoles chasing each other, and could see that their eyes were large and gleaming, opaline.

"How long have they lived here?" he whispered, more to the hippocampi than Regulus, as if they could answer him. "Did your ancestors breed them?"

"No," said Regulus. "And they didn't try to tame them or kill them and sell them, either, which I must admit is surprising when you consider

some of my ancestors. They've always been content to watch them. Maybe they were just too beautiful."

Harry nodded, unable to speak. The hippocampi bore no web, it had been one of the first things he looked for. This was what magical creatures should look like in their natural state, unfettered, content, looking as if they had never known fear.

"Wouldn't you like to live in a place like this, Harry?" Regulus asked, leaning on the glassy rock and forcing Harry, reluctantly, to pay attention to him. "Somewhere you could watch water-horses, and take delight in them? Perhaps relax after your vates activities?"

Harry looked back at the water, and a mare cupping her fins around her foal, without answering for a moment. The prospect was infinitely more tempting than it'd been an hour ago, that was for sure.

But in the end, he had to shake his head again.

"Why?" Regulus asked. "I've had some time to think, Harry, and I don't believe you anymore about not valuing the Black legacy. It might be something you'd never ask for for yourself, but you're responsible. You would cherish and love these places and these things if I gave them into your hands; I know you would. And you'd use them well, which is definitely something I can't say for most of my family. So. Why?"

Harry took a deep breath and turned his back on the hippocampi, leaning on the glassy rock, too. "You're not going to like it."

Regulus gave him a quiet smile. Peter had agreed to wait upstairs for them—probably, Harry thought now, so that Regulus could have a chance to speak in private with Harry. Without him around, there wasn't the banter, though Regulus's voice was still light when he said, "A month at the Ministry and fifteen years as a toy have taught me to get used to lots of things I don't like, Harry. I'll survive."

He really won't like it. Harry rubbed his palm on his robes and decided to forge ahead. "Because I feel like it's too much," he said

quietly. "Just—too much. So, it's connected to what I told you before. Too many possessions. Too much of everything."

"You don't feel like you deserve it," said Regulus, the same way he had before.

Harry gritted his teeth. "Yes. If you must put it that way, then yes!" His voice rose into a shout on the last words before he could stop himself. He turned away in embarrassed silence, and managed to relax the pressure on his teeth at last. He leaned his forehead on the glass and watched two tadpoles knock each other silly with their tails.

"I don't think it's incomprehensible, Harry," Regulus told the back of his head. "And I don't hate your answer. On the other hand, I do think this is a relic of something you haven't faced fully yet. Gifts embarrass you. Why?"

"Please, don't," Harry whispered, and closed his eyes.

"Please, tell me." Regulus's voice was soft and earnest. "I'm not asking for you to tell me anything else, Harry, and I'm certainly not asking you to accept being made my heir yet. Just the answer to this one question. I know what my version of your answer is, but I'm sure it'll pale besides yours. Please?"

The wistful ring of his voice made Harry squeeze his eyes shut until they hurt. Then he said, to get it over with, "Because it implies too much belonging, too much notice. Gifts are things you give out of gratitude or pleasure or because you like a person or to settle a debt. I can accept that last one. Not the others."

"Why?" Regulus whispered again.

Harry tensed his shoulders unhappily. But this much pressure brought to bear on a specific point wasn't something he could resist, and he had the trust to think that Regulus wouldn't repeat this conversation to anyone else, not even Snape. "I don't want to be noticed. I hate it. And I—" Oh, Merlin. Can I say this? "The only family I've ever wanted to belong to was my own."

He felt Regulus embrace him. He felt tears swarming and struggling beneath the surface, and the urge to keep talking, just tell Regulus how badly he wanted to belong somewhere, anywhere, but how it was tangled up with the notion that the only true belonging he would ever have was back at Godric's Hollow with Lily and James and Connor, and how much he hated his parents, with a strength that frightened him, for that longing when he thought about it in too much depth.

But that would mean spilling all his emotions about his parents, because all his emotions were linked, and one hatred would drag forth others, ones Harry didn't want to admit he had, because he wanted to be able to forgive them, and how could he forgive them if he loathed them with a fury like a storm rising at sea? At least, if he kept those feelings private, then he didn't have to look up and see the knowledge reflected in another person's eyes.

He used the Occlumency pools to swallow the emotions, one by one, until he felt calmer. He opened his eyes, and looked to the side, past Regulus, and saw Peter frozen with one foot on the steps coming down from the upper part of the house, caught in the doorway just as he had been at Hogwarts.

His face wasn't etched with pity, which Harry thought he couldn't have taken, but compassion. And his eyes looked straight into Harry's, and he saw far too much. Harry wrenched free of Regulus and walked over to a different part of the glassy wall to watch the hippocampi again. He regulated his breathing, counted in Mermish, and used the other tricks that Lily had taught him to keep going when he was in the middle of a war-zone. It shouldn't be this hard. He shouldn't have this much time keeping himself to himself. He had to be strong, with the trial coming up, and Lily and James both needing all the strength he could give in the fight to save them from execution.

This was why I didn't want to look at my emotions, he thought. It'll only dredge the depths and bring up all sorts of wet and nasty things, not bright and shining fish. There's so much—Yes, he could admit it, since no one else could hear his thoughts. There's so much that's ugly in my feelings for my parents. I don't want them to see.

He hadn't finished completely sitting on his feelings when Peter said, "Actually, Harry, this is connected to what I'd like to talk to you about. I know the Seers invited you to the Sanctuary for the summer. Obviously, circumstances made it impossible for you to go. But they've renewed the invitation for you over the Christmas holidays. If you could—"

"No." Stars, no.

"Will you tell me why?" Peter sounded as gentle as Regulus had, and Harry wondered if they'd taken lessons from each other.

"I don't want them to see me." It was an efficient answer. Harry watched the tadpoles swirl around each other, doing a dance with tails linked, and shuddered at the thought of a Seer looking at him now.

He had, Merlin knew why, imagined that all of himself was the same forgiveness and belief in freedom and protective instincts that Vera had described to him when she saw him last year. But when he thought too deeply about his emotions, he was looking straight into the face of hatred, and anger, and even a vengeful instinct that he'd felt in flashes before, but was getting a full dose of now, as the trial drew closer. A quick temper was permissible, barely, if it led to him defending the rights of others. But the wash of emotion he'd felt after Bellatrix took his hand had still managed to kill Dragonsbane. Harry had thought he only hated Bellatrix and Voldemort. It was a shock to find that part of him hated James and Lily, too.

Everyone was always encouraging him to talk about his feelings, to be honest, to let them see his real emotions.

And what would they think if they could see them? They'd be horrified. Hell, I'm horrified. Harry shook his head. No. I can't release them for the same reason I can't just let my magic run wild. They're in me. I've acknowledged them. Great. Now they can go away again.

This was the reason he wasn't going to testify under Veritaserum in the trial, though once he'd thought he would. Along with the desire to save and protect his parents that would come out in his answers to the Wizengamot's questions would come his contradictory desires to

hurt them and see them condemned. And if the Wizengamot heard about those, unless all the members were more strongly influenced by Dumbledore's spell than Harry thought possible a few weeks afterward, then he could bid hope for his parents' freedom, either from death or Tullianum, farewell.

In, out, in, out, he coaxed his breathing. He thought he managed to look and sound normal by the time he turned around and smiled at Peter.

"No, thank you," he said softly. "I'm glad to have you back again, Peter, but I won't be going to the Sanctuary."

They spoke to him quietly for a short time more, but seeing him adamant on the subjects they'd brought him there to address, they gave in and showed him other things about Copley-by-the-Sea. Harry relaxed by degrees, and even managed to study the house with a great deal of pleasure. He still thought Regulus's children, if he had any, should inherit it, or failing that Narcissa and Draco, or Andromeda and Tonks, but he could admire it. There was no law against that.

"Harry."

Harry blinked and almost walked right back out of the bedroom. Draco was standing beside his bed with a strange look in his eyes. The only expression Harry could compare it to was the look he'd worn the night Harry had taken the Blood Whip Curse. (Luckily, Draco still hadn't taken revenge on Marietta, because Madam Pomfrey still could not figure out how to Transfigure her back).

"What?" he asked.

"Come here."

Harry swallowed and glanced sideways, for once hoping that Blaise would be in his bed to save him. But if Blaise was there, he had up a Silencing Charm, and one to hold his curtains closed, and another one to make even the subtlest telltale signs of his presence unnoticeable.

Reluctantly, he walked up to Draco and looked down at the bed. Something that looked like a Pensieve stood there; in fact, Harry supposed it was a Pensive. But the liquid that filled it was gold instead of silver.

Harry looked up at Draco, and quickly away. The intent stare in his eyes was simply too much, after the good hard look Harry had been forced to take at himself earlier that day in Copley. "What is this, Draco?" He hoped for his voice to be steady, and it wasn't. Damn.

Draco gently cupped his chin and turned his face back around, stooping and kissing him with great intensity. Harry closed his eyes and yielded. It did feel good, and, as ashamed as he was to admit it, he felt like he needed it after the confusion of emotions that he'd felt earlier.

Draco backed off and said, "It's a spell I invented. I did it just the way you said. I wanted it to happen, needed it to happen, and it did. Please, Harry, look into it."

Harry swallowed, and bowed his head, and slid his face into the golden liquid of the Pensieve.

He flipped over twice, the way he might when entering a normal memory, and found himself watching himself. It was a memory of breakfast this morning, when he'd apparently eaten in an abstracted manner, staring at the wall all the while. Harry couldn't imagine why Draco had found it interesting enough to record.

Then he realized that, although he could see Draco sitting beside him and watching him, he wasn't himself, free to observe the memory and see whatever happened more objectively than either person involved could have. He felt as if he were Draco. Ordinary Pensieves didn't compel the observer to share a particular viewer's mindset. This one did.

And it wasn't just an awareness of his mind, either, like the things Harry saw when he used Legilimency on someone else. This was an absolute immersion into—

Into what Draco felt, and thought, about him, Harry realized.

He knew, for one wrenching moment, what it felt like to impatiently crave and want physical affection, not fear it as a terrible thing. He knew what uncomplicated anger at his parents felt like, the utter hatred Draco had at them for having cramped and twisted Harry's mind. He knew what right and wrong were in matters of abuse to most of the rest of the world, and he knew the pride of someone who had grown up in a loving family and was at the moment fervently grateful for it, and he knew what it felt like for someone to love him.

For just one moment, Harry had to see himself as identical to other people in the capacity to be loved and seen, and, in Draco's eyes at least, a great deal more important.

Then the moment shattered.

Harry yanked his head out of the Pensieve, all his nerves afire. He shuddered, the more so when he felt Draco's hand come down on his shoulder.

"I told you that I was going to push, Harry," Draco said softly into his ear. "This is one of those times. Now you know what I feel for you. You've had the chance to see the world through my eyes. Will you allow me to see it through yours? I would like that." He toyed gently with Harry's hair, and Harry, knowing exactly what Draco wanted to do with him and why, was amazed that he had consented to wait so long already, even if the very notion of feeling that good made him freeze, himself. "And perhaps it will help me to be more patient," Draco added, as though reading his mind, "because, believe me, there are times I'm a second away from just hauling you into one of those abandoned classrooms we use for the dueling club and not leaving until we've both broken through every single bit of your conditioning that remains."

Harry swallowed, and swallowed again. Today was a day of unexpected emotional revelations, it seemed.

And here was another one. If there was a part of him that could hate his parents, and it could exist side by side with the part of him that loved and wanted to forgive them, there was a part of him that reached greedily for what Draco was offering, even as his training came down like a cage around it.

Harry wanted. He hadn't known he could want that strongly, that there was anything of it in him at all.

He was a second away from doing as Draco asked and lowering his own mindset into the Pensieve.

And then he remembered what Draco would see if he looked right now. All that hatred, all that anger, that Harry wasn't nearly as perfect as he pretended to be. Shame flooded him, pouring like a fall of gravel across his emotions, making them all the same color and papering over the cracks.

"Not—today," Harry said. "Not just now. Eventually. After the trial."

He kept his head bowed, but Draco grasped his chin and tilted it up. He was frowning, but lightly, more as if he were trying to understand than as if he blamed Harry.

"What's wrong?" he whispered.

And Harry experienced that same overwhelming urge to tell someone that he'd felt around Regulus and Peter, only ten times worse, because it was Draco, and there was a real chance that the urge would break around his strongest resolutions. He hunched unhappily. Yes, yes, he wanted someone else to know, he could admit that, but what price would easing his own soul carry? Forcing someone else into horror and terror of him, just so that he could feel a bit better?

When he'd remolded his mind, Harry had left spots along the steel skeleton for the new emotions to grow like leaves. He was wondering now if that had been a mistake. What if he didn't want some of those emotions that other people thought of as normal? What if he should have trimmed off those leaves, because the depth of what he felt could be dangerous, given his magic?

He certainly hadn't thought that he would ever grow the emotions towards his parents that other people expected him to feel.

"I'm sorry," he answered Draco, when he'd wrestled down the immediate temptation to speak. "I can't tell you yet."

Draco leaned forward and kissed him one more time, then withdrew with a small nod and picked up the Pensieve. "After the trial, then. I hope you hold to that, Harry." He gave him a faint smile, and slid out of the bedroom.

Harry made his way to his own bed and spelled the curtains tightly shut enough that not even Fawkes, Argutus, or the Many snake, whom he'd left behind again, could get in. He just wanted to be alone for a while, to rebuild his shields and constrain his emotions and try to breathe.

Five more days. I can get through this. I can. And I can help insure that my parents aren't executed, and free them if I can, without exploding into some stupid fit of tears or rage. I can. They'll be doomed if the Wizengamot sees what I feel about them.

Intermission: Where Only Love Can Carry Her

The first time Pansy knew how someone else was going to die was the day before the trial of Harry's parents.

She was hurrying towards the Great Hall, since she'd awakened slightly late for breakfast. She passed a Hufflepuff first-year at the top of the stairs from the dungeons, also heading towards breakfast, yawning and rubbing at her eyes.

Pansy turned her head, and her eyes skimmed over the girl's face. And then she couldn't be uninterested any more, because she saw shards of wood decorating her, and saw the blood, and her heart thumped in mad fear as the knowledge tucked itself inside her head, as undeniable at this point as her knowledge of the alphabet.

The girl would join her House's Quidditch team, and die in a fall from her broom when she was seventeen.

Pansy took a deep breath, and realized the girl was staring at her. She shook her head and hurried on. For a moment, she'd nearly yielded to the temptation to gasp or shriek aloud in shock, and of course she couldn't do that.

She'd stepped further into necromancy on Halloween night. After that, she'd finally had to give up going with her left arm bared, though the rest of the Slytherins still did. She had to hide her body behind the wraps, except for her hands. It was necessary, to distance herself from the physical world around her and step into the world of spirits. Pansy had known that as surely as she had known that she couldn't let hatred of Harry drive her any further into this study.

It had to be love, passion for working with the dead, and nothing else.

Pansy had spent hours kneeling in a rune circle Halloween night, before she finally wrestled her way through the conflicting impulses and realized that hatred for what had happened to Dragonsbane hadn't been her primary motivator for a while now, if it ever was. She really did love the dead. She really did want to follow her father. And

as the new knowledge came flooding in, she knew she couldn't blame Harry for his death.

Death was an honor. Death was the supreme moment of communion with life, in fact, the moment when the necromancer tasted it for the last time before leaving it and becoming one with the dead. Harry had been part of her father's death, and Pansy should have questioned him about it earlier, so that she could know more about what it felt like for the necromancer involved.

Luckily, he was one of her Speakers, so she still could. She had given up talking to everyone else now.

She slid into place at the Slytherin table, and Millicent nodded to her. Pansy kept her eyes on her oatmeal, not sure that she wanted to look up and see how her friend was going to die.

"Pansy? Are you all right?"

It has to be faced. It must be faced. Pansy reminded herself of that, and lifted her head, gaze locking on Millicent's face.

She relaxed. Millicent was going to die at a decent age, nearly a hundred, in fact, in the arms of her third husband. Pansy snickered into her hands in sheer relief, and Millicent's face both eased and tightened.

"Are you sure you're all right?" she demanded.

Pansy nodded, and then turned back to her oatmeal. Her gaze moved out across the Great Hall as she did so. She had made the hardest decision on Halloween. She had known that necromancers had to see the deaths of other wizards and witches, and never tell anyone about them. She had the example of her father to show her the immense courage that living with such a thing took. Pansy was no Gryffindor, but she had accepted this burden, so she had to live with it.

She saw the bright spots of illness, the grayness of age, the visions of accidents amazing or mundane. There was quite a lot of blood, and

the motionless green flashes of Avada Kedavra. Pansy winced. It seemed that many of her classmates, and some of the teachers, were going to die in the War.

But she didn't feel the temptation, any more, to tell anyone of what she had seen. She nodded at each death, if not physically, then inside her head, and her tension eased, and her determination grew. What necromancers saw was inevitable, unlike what Seers who predicted the future said; it could not be changed, or manipulated, or turned aside. It happened. Pansy closed her eyes.

It's no wonder that necromancers are forbidden to speak of it. It's a sacrifice so the dead will trust us, but it's also something the living would never want to know. They hate death. They don't understand. They'd question, want to know the utmost limit of their days, and then blame us for telling them. They'd live lives bounded by their ends, instead of in that glorious uncertainty.

Pansy ate her breakfast. It was Wednesday, and she had History of Magic, always a boring class. If she didn't fortify herself with food enough to become sleepy, then she was likely to start talking to one of the half-formed ghosts that hovered in the castle, and everyone but the Slytherins in the class would become hysterical.

She'd finished most of what she could eat when she saw a trio of people come through the doors of the Great Hall. Pansy glanced up at them.

Her breath caught. They were Harry, Draco, and Harry's brother, and as she watched, Potter peeled off from the other two and went towards the Gryffindor table. Harry and Draco proceeded on towards the Slytherin one, conducting an argument that was low-voiced until Harry snapped something and pulled away from Draco, walking the rest of the distance alone. His face was white with strain. Pansy wasn't surprised, given that his parents' trial began tomorrow.

But it was the vision she had seen as she watched the three of them together that was overwhelming her.

I want to tell them.

But that would break her vows, and even if she could still talk to Millicent and Harry, she couldn't tell them about her visions. Pansy tried to lower her eyes back to her plate and forget what she'd seen.

She couldn't.

She watched Harry and Draco as they settled into place—still next to each other, for all their arguing. Harry ignored Draco entirely as he piled sausages on his plate and started eating, though the bright hive cobra around his neck and the Omen snake on his shoulder both seemed as willing to eat from Draco's hand as Harry's. Meanwhile, Draco went right on staring at Harry.

Pansy managed to eat a bit more, but the food was harsh ashes in her mouth. She rose at last and left, her garments moving about her in directions that the wind of her speed couldn't account for. The ghosts were beginning to catch hold of her and play with her clothes, since she was partially in the everyday, sunlit world and partially in theirs.

She leaned against the wall of the first floor corridor and closed her eyes. She had a few minutes before History of Magic began.

I don't even know what a vision like that means.

But she knew that she did, and that last protest was just the instinctive bleat of a child trying to get out of something difficult.

Pansy straightened, took a deep breath, and turned towards class. She would keep her vows. She would not tell Harry, or Draco, or even Potter, who would surely get the vision wrong even if he tried to repeat it to the others.

She would hold straight and true to her course.

The knowledge and vision of her own death had also come to her on Halloween night, and she had spent some time in tears. If she could overcome that, she could overcome anything she saw for anyone else.

Chapter Forty: Descent and Dissent

Harry woke on the morning of November sixteenth to a cold slap on his cheek.

He blinked, half-expecting that Draco had opened the curtains and used a cold washcloth to hit him. Then he realized that the creature sitting on the pillow beside his face and staring at him was not Fawkes, though they were the same size and looked superficially similar, and sat up quickly.

The red-eyed bird opened its fanged jaws and laughed at him. It was just drawing back one talon, with which it'd stitched another pattern of icy cuts on Harry's right cheek. Harry lifted his fingers to them, and found them already freezing over. The bird moved its lizard-like tail as if that pleased it.

No one can see me but you, but everyone can see them. They are a mark. I feel like marking you. You acknowledge me too little.

Harry stared at the bird instead of attacking. If it had come through the wards on Hogwarts and the charms he used to guard his bed every night, then he doubted there was much he could do to hurt it. Besides, now he felt some sense of familiarity from the vicious, laughing voice.

It felt like his magic had, the summer after second year when it was just free from the phoenix web and surreptitiously trying to murder his parents—just as angry, and just as vicious.

“What are you?” he whispered. “Are you the magic of a powerful wizard trapped somewhere?”

The bird flexed its clawed wings and stalked towards him. Harry kept staring at it, watching it come, but called up his wandless magic when it got too close. The bird didn't seem frightened. It just paused, its head cocked to one side in a listening attitude. Then it hissed and folded its wings. If I must be tied to someone else, it said, seeming to drop the words into his mind, I suppose you are not the worst choice.

At least you are powerful. Then it uttered another hiss, a mocking one, as though the idea amused it terribly.

“Tied?” Harry thought of his bond with Fawkes, but even he could not imagine that this thing was anything like a phoenix, accustomed as he was by now to trying to see beyond the surfaces of dangerous magical creatures. “What do you mean? Are you actually bonded to me, then?”

The bird-creature lashed its tail, which coiled around Harry’s wrist with a sting like frostbite. Harry shook his hand free, and all the while, the thing’s scarlet eyes considered him.

I am tied, said the creature at last. Against my will, since you forget about me so often. But things will fall out as they will. It may be that the tie will be severed at last, and I need not worry about you. Or it may be that I will find my home with you. It hissed again, and the teeth snapped an inch short of Harry’s face; he’d jerked his head back just in time to prevent it taking an ear. A poor home that would be, and yet I would not mind it when the time came.

“You’re making no sense,” Harry told it, trying to keep his voice low. He wasn’t sure if the soothing tone he’d used with magical creatures would work on one that seemed to be made of magic, but he might as well try it. “I can help you, if you’ll just tell me what you mean.”

You can’t help me. You’re as much a victim of this tie as I am, as he is, as all of us are. The bird-creature extended its wings and leaped up, hovering. We must wait for things to fall. Perhaps you will be pierced. I would like that.

It swooped at Harry, who ducked. When he looked up again, the creature had faded from sight entirely, just as it had when he met it in the sky above the Quidditch Pitch. At least he had some idea of why, now. If the creature was made of pure magic, then it could vanish at will. The body it wore was only a temporary construct, anyway, like the box that had imprisoned Harry’s emotions in second year.

But when he tried to imagine why the creature would choose to appear as a bird, or who might have sent it, he wound up blank. He

was bound to so many different people with so many different kinds of vows and alliance promises. It could be that one of his allies secretly resented him, or there might be someone bound alive and suffering whom Harry wasn't even aware of. The sentient nature of the magic would argue that, at least. Harry's own magic had gained intelligence only when it was tamped down by the phoenix web and prevented from having its freedom; it had become part of him when it was fully, and finally, freed.

The only thing Harry could find to be thankful for in all this was that he had seen the bird before he bound Henrietta, so he knew it couldn't be her.

He touched the icy scabs on his cheek and closed his eyes, concentrating. He had studied a little more medical magic since the Woodhouse battle and the Blood Whip Curse, especially these last few days, when any distraction from the impending—thing—was welcome. He murmured the word "Integro," and felt the ice melt, as it had when Madam Pomfrey had healed the first set of cuts. Harry had the feeling she hadn't accepted his words about running into a tree as he flew too low on his broom, but at least these would just look like normal scabs now. In time, they would fade, and, if they followed the example of the first set of cuts, not leave scars behind.

"Harry? Are you all right?"

Does Draco have a set of senses attuned to my use of healing magic? Harry rolled his eyes as the curtains got yanked back. "Odd cut, but other than that, fine," he said dismissively, and climbed out of bed.

Draco followed him to the loo in silence. Harry ignored him, even though he knew that Draco had, like Harry, been excused attending his classes today so that he could go to the trial.

The trial.

Harry shivered, and tried to ignore the nervous flutter in his stomach. Today might be the only day of the trial, or it might cover several. It would depend on how many witnesses the prosecution called—

though Harry wanted to think otherwise, he could not pretend to himself that the defense would be able to call many—what the Wizengamot had already seen, who believed what, and on other factors that Harry could not estimate or predict.

He did know that he would testify first, for neither prosecution nor defense, and that his information, though in theory purely factual, would also carry an emotional tone. That emotional tone might play a large part in condemning or saving his parents.

Harry felt his breath speed up. He ducked under the shower and let a flood of cold water sluice the back of his neck to try and calm himself down.

So you carry the responsibility for their lives in your hand. You've done that before, as when you planned the Woodhouse attack. You can do it now. If their future happiness is a small glass ball that must not be shattered, then you'll just have to make sure that you don't shatter it.

And that brought him into the realm of things he could control, estimate, and predict. Harry used his magic to run down to the roots of his hair while he considered his weapons.

Occlumency, of course. Slide all the inconvenient emotions into the pools, and leave the ones that might spare their lives near the top. If the Wizengamot sees only that you feel sorrow about their arrest and indifference to the events of your childhood, then you might well succeed in convincing them that the abuse wasn't that bad. How could it be, if it didn't leave that much of a mark?

Manipulation. You won't be testifying under Veritaserum. You can manipulate and lead the questions, respond in such a way that they ask you things you want to answer and not things you don't.

Sympathy and forgiveness. Repeat those as often as you can. Make them the theme of your arguments. And draw the Wizengamot's sympathy in the direction you want it to flow.

Harry had promised that he would not use his magic to force the issue, that he would not compel or coerce anyone to believe him. And he wouldn't. That was still true. But he had said nothing about testifying the way that Snape and Draco wanted him to, either. This was a battle, and he could not be certain of winning.

But he would struggle with all the weapons at his disposal. And this was a battle he intended to win, for all the good that would do him. Freedom for his parents might be a distant goal, but life need not be, even if it was a life spent in Tullianum Prison.

As they went down to breakfast, Harry opened his Occlumency pools and began sliding the inconvenient emotions in.

First went all the tangled mess of his contradictory hatred and love, of course. He would leave only such gentle, fond affection near the surface as might convince the Wizengamot that, yes, he cared a bit for his parents. They wouldn't understand if they saw the violence of his love. After all, as Harry could now parrot from numerous books on the subject, abused children weren't supposed to love their parents.

Well, he did. But they wouldn't see that. So away it went, and Harry summoned up an emotion as gentle and calm and pure as milk, and distributed it in a floating river over the surface of his mind.

Then he submerged the grief. He could not weep about the past during the trial. He would see the past, face it, but he could not weep over it. And he would see his parents, and he could not crack when he faced them, either. He drowned his sorrow deep, and attached stones to it so it couldn't rise again without a great deal of effort on his part.

He was trying to decide how much of his desire to see his parents free he should leave above the surface when Pansy sat down next to him and whispered, "Harry?"

Harry turned and looked at her, startled that she'd decided to address him by his first name, or indeed at all. Save when she wanted him to speak for her during classes, she'd been growing more and more silent the past few weeks, and sometimes used sign language before

any words, as if she were forgetting how to speak aloud. He could see her eyes now, hazel like her mother's, staring at him intently from the depths of her hood.

"Yes?" he asked.

Pansy bit her lip, then said, "I wanted to tell you that I understand, now. I saw the vision of my own death on Halloween." She gave a deep shudder, and then said, "I understand that my father didn't perish in some ill-advised attempt to save you. He knew exactly what he was doing. Mother told me that, but I didn't know it. So, if you were still worrying about that, please know that I forgive you."

Harry blinked, and did feel a small grief in him ease. He hadn't done a great deal of thinking lately about Pansy, but at least she wasn't giving him extra stress and strain to carry into the trial. He nodded. "Thank you."

Pansy nodded one more time, paused as if she would say something, then stood and glided from the Great Hall. Harry watched her, for a moment thoroughly distracted from his own preoccupations. She's been carrying the knowledge of her own death for two weeks? And others' deaths, too? From what little Harry knew of necromancy, Halloween was the usual night for the initiation of the deeper sacrifices, and Walpurgis the night when a necromancer would complete all of them and finish his or her training. Harry didn't think Pansy could finish her training by the next Walpurgis, but she'd certainly gone further than he thought.

"Harry."

Harry jumped, and looked sideways to meet Draco's eyes. That was a mistake, and he knew it almost the moment he looked, but then he found himself unable to turn away. Draco gently slid a bowl of porridge in front of him.

"You weren't eating," he whispered.

Harry shrugged free of his strange preoccupation and picked up his spoon. "Pansy had to tell me something," he murmured.

Draco just nodded. Then he said, "I'll be right there for you, Harry, you know, if you need to lean on someone." He paused suggestively. "Or if you want to talk to me."

Harry said nothing. It was true that he hadn't mentioned the trial for the past few days, and snapped at Draco to stop every time he'd tried to bring the topic up. It was also true that he wasn't sorry for that. He'd had to dance a delicate dance. He couldn't lose control, but, on the other hand, if he'd started sinking his emotions into the Occlumency pools too early, then Draco or Snape would have noticed something was wrong and pressed more strongly.

He turned his eyes back to the porridge and started again on the emotional immersion. When he went into the courtroom, he would be calm. He was not a Lord, and he didn't intend to interfere in Scrimgeour's Ministry. He could lift his hand and just command his parents' chains to fly off, but he wouldn't. He would just try as hard as he could to triumph.

"Are you ready?"

Narcissa glanced up from her dressing table and smiled at him in the mirror as she fastened her earrings into place. "Really, Lucius. Intruding into a pureblood woman's bedroom before she finishes putting on her jewelry, and without even an endearment! Have you no manners at all?"

Lucius lingered in the doorway for a moment, watching his wife. Narcissa's long, pale fingers moved swiftly over the earrings, simple golden ornaments that wouldn't look like anything impressive to a quick glance. A more than quick glance would reveal them as scarab beetles. They would come alive at a command from Narcissa, animating to attack the genitals of an opponent.

Her blonde hair was wound up on her head today, revealing a long white neck that would probably distract attention from the golden torque coiled at her throat. That torque was a Black artifact, a snake with its tail in its mouth. It could also come to life at a quiet word, and stretch its jaws wide enough to eat someone alive.

Her dress shimmered red with small golden threads tucked here and there. Lucius wondered how many in the courtroom would recognize it as a battle-gown, not magical in and of itself, but declaring Narcissa's solemn intent to start a blood-feud with the Wizengamot members if justice didn't fall out and the Potter parents were freed.

"Going armed, my dear?" he asked.

"Yes." Narcissa's eyes met his in the mirror, and there was no humor at all in them. "You know why."

Lucius nodded, and entered, sliding his arms around her waist. Narcissa leaned back against him as she slipped her wand down her sleeve, then turned and gave him a fierce, hungry kiss that made Lucius wish they didn't have a trial to attend.

He looked at himself in the mirror, studying the edges of his face. It remained the perfect, cool mask he needed, though. He nodded. "We should leave," he said, and, stepping back, offered his wife his arm.

Uncharacteristically, she didn't take it. She stared into his eyes instead, and said, "How badly do you think it will turn out?"

Lucius sighed. Narcissa spoke of more than one thing. "The trial should go as well as can be expected," he murmured. The Daily Prophet had been carrying reports of Albus Dumbledore's mind-compelling spell for the past two weeks, and most wizards and witches Lucius knew were shocked and angry, even if they hadn't paid much attention to the trial before. And there was the endless evidence on the side of the prosecution. "About the other matter—"

"I think we should tell Harry," Narcissa interrupted.

Lucius frowned. "Not yet, Narcissa. The name of Yaxley will mean little to him until he meets her in battle. And you know the reason we held off. Our Potter will have little chance of concentrating on anything else with the trial proceeding. When it is done, and his parents safely gone, either in Tullianum or to death, then we can tell him, and warn him about her."

Narcissa bit her lip, but, at last, yielded to his advice as she had for the past week, and took his arm. Lucius guided her towards the door of the Manor. They would be Apparating to London once they were past the outer wards, then approaching the Ministry on foot. The recent Death Eater activity had the Department of Magical Law Enforcement paranoid about anyone coming closer than that by Apparition, not that Lucius could blame them.

As they walked, his mind ran grimly on news he'd never thought to hear. It was true that, during the First War, the Dark Lord had had a Yaxley Death Eater. But that one hadn't gone to Azkaban, and Lucius had assumed, at most, that he would rejoin Voldemort when the Dark Lord arose again. One more Death Eater wand was not much of a concern.

Instead of simply torturing Yaxley for not showing him loyalty during the years he was gone, however, Voldemort had done something worse: called in a debt of honor to the entire family. There was no Dark pureblood family more obsessed with honor than Yaxley. They'd put themselves at Voldemort's service.

And he'd chosen to take Indigena Yaxley, the Thorn Bitch, into his service.

That was bad. It was very bad. Indigena was what Bellatrix Lestrange might have been if she were sane and ten times more dangerous.

Lucius knew that he had to tell their Potter the Thorn Bitch was a Death Eater, but it would only put more pressure on him now. Let it lie, until the trial is done.

He didn't want to acknowledge how close he thought Harry was to breaking.

Augustus Starrise added the final bell, and stepped away from his mirror with a nod that made the bells sway in his hair. There. Now he looked like a war wizard capable of killing someone.

Not a bad entrance to his first political activity in more than a year, if he did say so himself.

He whirled away from the mirror, hearing the bells ring softly around him, and picked up his wand and his staff, which was carved with white oak and banded with gold. It pulsed gently in his hand as he spun it. Augustus felt a smile curve his lips as he ran his fingers over the end of the staff. He knew it was a wistful, too-gentle smile, but that was all right. There was no one in the bedroom to see.

Alba had helped him add the final band of gold to the staff, a few days before the Death Eaters took her. Her loving presence, and some of her magic, lingered in it still. Augustus closed his eyes, and imagined his twin sister standing before him, as tall as death and twice as lovely.

“Perhaps soon, Alba,” he whispered, “you’ll have your justice. I know it must pain you, looking down on the world, seeing your murderers go unpunished and one of your sons run wild. But I think this plan should work.”

A knock sounded on the door. Augustus smoothed his face stern, and then opened it. It was Pharos, of course, his nephew and heir, Alba’s younger boy, bowing nervously to his uncle.

“It’s time to go?” he murmured. Augustus nodded in approval. Though Pharos still had trouble controlling his expression—and he was such an openhearted, honest young man, that was no surprise—his voice was cool and calm.

“It is,” said Augustus, and swept towards the Portkey room of his house. The portraits on the walls, showing past Starrises in dignified stances, nodded and sometimes bowed to him, depending on how much reverence they felt for the current head of the family. The windows blazed, open on the sunlight of a perfectly beautiful fall day. Augustus was glad the Potters’ trial was occurring after October, so that he might attend it without fear of the Sunset Accords lopping off one of his limbs.

He could admit it: he'd felt chagrin last year when Scrimgeour had forced him out of the Ministry's arena, and again when Fudge was deposed, and again when he realized how Tybalt had run to Potter's side. But time had sleeted past him and mellowed his opposition, and then had come the news of Potter's abuse, and then Augustus had realized what an opportunity he had.

Several things had changed his mind on allying with the Potter boy. The first was the fact that he was powerful, and not completely lost to Dark magic. If he were Dark, Tybalt wouldn't have allied with him. Merlin knew the boy had gone wrong, but not that far wrong. He was no Death Eater, nor any other species of cringing follower to crouch at a Dark Lord's feet. So Potter must have some spark of Light in him, and Augustus might encourage that to grow if he did join the alliance.

The second was the news of the abuse. Augustus's hand tightened on the staff as he thought about it. That was sickening, the news of what the Potters had done to their own son. And James Potter came from a Light family, too. Augustus was hoping the Ministry would follow the ancient custom of allowing the whole crowd at the trial to spit on the condemned—for he had no doubt that James Potter would be condemned, as he deserved to be. Surely someone had spoken to Scrimgeour about that already, reminded him of the importance of tradition?

The third thing was the realization of just how many former Death Eaters Potter had gathered around him. Augustus loathed the thought of working beside them, but not so much the thought of fighting beside them.

And there was always the chance that he might find Alba's murderers among them, or learn information that would lead him to the guilty parties among those Death Eaters who'd stayed Death Eaters.

Augustus planned to make formal submission to Potter and offer him the assistance of the Starrise family coffers the moment the trial was done.

He did hope he would get to spit on James Potter first, though. "Are you all right?"

Hawthorn started and turned around. Keen though her ears had been since Greyback had bitten her, Lupin had been a werewolf longer, and could still move with a silence that baffled all her attempts to hear him. "Fine," she said shortly.

Lupin looked at her with calm amber eyes. "You shouldn't try to lie to a packmate," he said quietly.

Hawthorn turned to face the wall again and didn't respond. She was already regretting her decision to accept Lupin's invitation and Portkey in to his quarters today before the trial began. It was too small a room to hold two werewolves, one of whom was upset.

"Harry will not hate you for testifying against his parents," Lupin told her back. "You do realize that, don't you?"

"And why shouldn't he?" Grateful, in a way, not to have to hide her emotions any longer, Hawthorn swung around and showed him her teeth, wishing she could lay her ears flat to her head. Wolfish gestures of anger were just so much more satisfying, somehow. "I know all about the memories, and I have to do it, but you know as well as I do that he wants his parents to go free."

Lupin's eyes shifted more towards amber. Hawthorn knew from his scent that he wasn't angry at her, though.

"There was a time when I would have agreed with him," said Lupin softly. "Before I knew about—all this. Now, I wish they would let James and Lily out in a wooded park where our pack might hunt them."

A shocked laugh escaped Hawthorn's lips before she could stop it. Then she rubbed her hand over her face. "Thank you," she said.

Lupin took a step nearer and rubbed his chin against her cheek. "Pack should cheer each other up," he said. "I wish we could go to Claudia right now, but that would only raise her cousin's suspicions."

Perhaps we can get one of her other cousins to owl her for us, and arrange a meeting where we might run together?”

“Perhaps,” said Hawthorn. She knew the suspicious Griffinsnest family, though, and didn’t think it would work. Claudia had managed to keep her lycanthropy a secret from everyone but her parents, who’d been present when she was bitten and decided to support her. Meeting with at least one known and obvious werewolf—Lupin’s signs were more obvious than others’, if you knew what you were looking for, since he’d been bitten so young—would expose her irreversibly to her relatives.

Hawthorn would have thought the precautions acceptable, last year. This one, she felt more and more anger towards the wizards and witches who treated werewolves like beasts, even though she had been one of them until her first full moon.

The feelings combined and melded with her more personal worries over Harry. If he broke during the trial, then Hawthorn could only imagine how long it might take him to recover, and what his enemies would do in the meanwhile. She’d heard rumblings of factions in the Ministry getting ready to push for tougher anti-werewolf laws.

“We’ll survive this,” Lupin whispered into her ear.

Hawthorn almost jumped again, but the pleasant relaxation she felt around anyone else of her pack prevented it. She didn’t understand this change in attitude, either. Normally, anything that gratified her wolf was something she hated, and vice versa. But the warmth and confidence she felt with Lupin, Delilah and Claudia made her feel like more than herself, more even than a divided soul, large and eager and ready to take on the world. And with Lupin’s help they were starting to heal, finally, the unexpected hole that Fergus’s death had left in their world.

“We’ll survive this,” said Lupin. “And he will. And he may even free us, be our vates, too, who knows?” He lifted his arms and tucked them around her shoulders.

Hawthorn leaned into the embrace, and nodded, and tried not to think of the look she'd seen on Harry's face that morning when she observed him from behind a glamour in the Great Hall.

Harry dropped out of Apparition and glanced around once. He'd come with Draco, Snape, Regulus, and Peter to a designated Apparition point within a half mile of the Ministry, in a London alley most Muggles didn't pay much attention to. They didn't have far to walk.

Draco clung close to Harry's side as they stepped into the open, in the perfect position for Harry to lean on him if he needed to. Harry rolled his eyes. He was fine, with his Occlumency pools burying his emotions. The stares Snape and Regulus kept giving him were overkill. Peter, luckily, seemed to be keeping his eyes to himself.

Harry managed to relax a bit as they made their way to the deserted telephone box that would let them into the Ministry. There was no reason to be nervous. Only a few Muggles were around, and a simple Distraction Charm made each of them consider the wizards as nothing important.

They passed a second alley, and then Harry caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of his eye, at the same moment as the Many snake coiled around his throat, whom he hadn't been able to leave behind this time, uttered a sharp hiss.

Harry swung around, in time to see a vaguely familiar man step out of the alley and aim his wand straight at Draco.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Harry heard Mulciber's voice from last year drumming in his head. ...no shield, no barrier can block the Killing Curse...

Harry turned sideways, wrapped his arms around Draco's waist, and bore him, spinning, to the ground. The Killing Curse sped over both their heads and chipped a bit of stone from a building. Harry heard a few Muggles gasp, but the Distraction Charm still seemed to be working.

That meant, though, that the attacker could go after the Muggles, and they wouldn't do anything to defend themselves.

Harry rolled away from Draco, though Draco was trying to cling to him, and rose hastily to his feet. Now he did recognize the man stalking towards him with a mad look in his eyes. It was Kingsley Shacklebolt, one of the Aurors who had questioned Harry when he'd taken Snape as his guardian in third year, and the first Auror to be sacked when Scrimgeour took office.

His eyes held a fanatic's fire, and Harry had no doubt that this desperate strike had come about because of his loyalty to Dumbledore.

Harry drew in a deep breath. "It's all right, Kingsley," he said, keeping his voice low and soothing, edging in front of Draco. "This trial is for my parents, not the Headmaster. If you could just—"

Kingsley swung his wand to orient on Snape. Harry could see the consequences that would follow like a catch of the Snitch in his mind's eye. Either Snape would die, or he himself would use the Killing Curse, and be lucky if he wasn't sent to Tullianum for wielding an Unforgivable.

Harry held out his hand. "Accio Kingsley's wand!"

The wand sped towards him, luckily before Kingsley could fire a Killing Curse. Harry had just started to breathe a sigh of relief when he saw Kingsley drawing another wand, and felt the deadness of the one in his hand.

This one was a blank wand, specially made for the task of killing. Kingsley still held his own.

Harry flung the blank wand down, and then Kingsley was pointing his own wand straight at him.

"Avada Kedavra," he said softly, and the blast of green fire that couldn't be stopped or turned aside came at Harry.

Harry rolled under it. He had to hope that Draco hadn't been just behind him, or Peter. He could see Regulus at Snape's shoulder, his own wand drawn, but he didn't know where the other two were.

No one cried out, but that didn't mean anything. The Killing Curse could strike too fast to leave someone time for a death scream. Harry didn't trust his own senses until he scrambled to his feet and turned, seeing no body behind him.

He faced Kingsley again as Snape cast a Blasting Curse. It bounced neatly off Kingsley's cloak. Harry felt his own face tighten. Kingsley's clothes were strengthened with a powerful Shield Charm, then.

He had to do something before one of the people he loved died or decided to use the Killing Curse. He was not losing Regulus, Peter, or Snape to Tullianum, damnit! He was close enough to that with his own parents.

He saw a small flash of movement crossing the ground between him and Kingsley, and then the former Auror shrieked and kicked. Harry saw a gray rat clinging fiercely to his ankle, biting for all he was worth. Peter had done that to Dumbledore once, too, to save Harry from his anger.

It gave Harry time to decide what to do. The Muggles were staring at them, now, the ones who hadn't fled screaming. The Ministry would undoubtedly be here in a moment—this close, wards could sense use of the Unforgivables—but Harry couldn't depend on them being in time to save everyone.

And now Kingsley was aiming his wand at Peter, the distance so close that Harry knew he wouldn't be able to put anything in between, as if anything would stop the Killing Curse but another body.

The thought passed fleetingly across his mind and was gone. No. He'd survived the green fire from Voldemort, but that was a unique occurrence that wouldn't happen again.

He didn't think he could use Legilimency on Kingsley without eye contact, and the Shield Charm's strength was unknown, and Harry didn't want to use Dark Arts this close to the Ministry.

That left Light spells that would take Kingsley out.

"Incito cordiem," he murmured.

The spell reached into Kingsley's chest, past the cloak, like the spells that Rosier had used on Harry which burned his blood or his heart. This was an incantation that Harry had heard of before, but never cast. He was hoping desperately that it would work.

It seemed to. He could feel Kingsley's heartbeat in his ears beside his own, and it began to quicken as he listened, pumping blood more and more frantically, going faster and faster.

Kingsley's wand fell from his hand. Peter scampered to safety. Kingsley knelt, shuddering, arms wrapped around himself, and Harry heard the heart pick up speed.

He knew this spell could kill someone. Force the heart to beat fast enough, and it would burst. Harry didn't want that to happen. He wanted to hand Kingsley over to the Aurors he could hear Apparating in.

"Finite Incantatem," he said, and then watched as Kingsley scurried for his wand again. This time, though, an Auror bound his hands, which swung free of the cloak, with a silvery rope, and others stepped in to remove the cloak and then capture him in a Body-Bind. Harry let out a long sigh and turned to check on the others.

Peter was staying a rat for the moment, obviously unwilling to transform back in front of the Aurors. Harry had doubts, then, that the Ministry's questioning had actually revealed Peter as an unregistered Animagus. Regulus and Snape were staring at Kingsley with similarly frozen expressions that said he should be glad he was in Ministry custody. Draco was hurrying up to Harry.

"Are you all right?" he whispered, wrapping him in a tight hug.

“Of course,” said Harry with a murmur, hugging him back, though he kept his eyes on Kingsley.

The attack had had an odd effect on him. Of course he’d been horribly afraid that the Killing Curse would hit someone before he could stop Kingsley, and he’d been worried about what spell he would use, but it was as though this had forced him past the last stresses and strains dangling in his mind, and forced him to ignore whatever of his own anger and hatred remained outside the Occlumency pools.

It’s best for everyone concerned when no one has to die. And when someone attacks like this, because of misguided loyalty, it’s more pitiful than anything else. The same thing happened to my parents. They’re ultimately pathetic.

If I can stop Kingsley like this, shouldn’t I be able to spare my parents death? It shouldn’t be that hard, and this first part of the trial all depends on me. Harry felt himself relax further. Yes, I can do this.

“Mr. Potter?” Harry glanced up, and saw an Auror he didn’t know standing over him, frowning. “My name is Auror Wilmot. I’ll be escorting you the rest of the way to the Ministry.”

Harry nodded, and turned to walk in the Auror’s custody, trusting the rest of them, or other Ministry people, to take care of Kingsley and the Muggles. His mind was still clear, as though he’d taken a great gulp of fresh air.

I can do this. I don’t know what I was worried about. Let’s go. He felt a genuine smile widening across his face. Even seeing my parents shouldn’t be hard when I’m feeling this good.

Chapter Forty-One: Reap the Whirlwind

This was interesting. More interesting than she'd expected it to be, actually.

Indigena Yaxley moved with the crowd flowing into the Wizengamot courtroom, nodding and smiling at everyone who paused to look at her. It was always easier to be friendly as Iris Raymonds than as herself. She felt as if she really were a new person whenever the plants beneath her skin flexed, reshaping her features into those of another witch. She carried another wand, too, and the Ministry officials had kindly registered that and given it back to her. Her real wand was carried, unregistered, in her robe pocket.

They hadn't checked for it. There were wards up that were supposed to make entering with an unregistered wand impossible, and none of the officials had any reason to be suspicious of the pretty young witch who flushed when her fingers accidentally brushed someone else's hand.

The yew leaves wrapped around Indigena's real wand kept the wards from functioning. It wasn't really their fault that they didn't know that.

The thing that made her visit to the courtroom interesting was the other people, though, not the tiresome Ministry officials. Indigena paused when she first stepped inside, looking around. She sniffed, and smiled. Here, away from her new Lord—the scent of whose magic was rather overwhelming—she could actually smell the different kinds of power the other wizards carried with them.

She was the most powerful wizard in the room, though she knew that would change when Potter entered. And she hadn't been sure, either, that she'd be more powerful than Severus Snape, the traitorous Death Eater who'd assigned himself Potter's guardian. It was a pleasure to find that she was, if barely.

Indigena made her way lazily towards the visitors' galleries. It didn't matter where she sat. Her new Lord had ordered her to keep an eye on Potter's trial and report anything interesting, but the true

information would come from his words, as it did in any trial, not his face. Indigena didn't have to see him.

"Excuse me."

Indigena had turned her head backwards to study a witch with an unusual rose perfume a few steps behind her, and had stumbled into someone without meaning to. She turned around and gave a small shake of her head. "The apology should be mine," she murmured. She knew her face wouldn't show recognition. The plants were not very flexible, and when they reshaped her into Iris, Indigena only let them express emotions that she thought she might need, so as not to overstrain the vines. Feral pleasure at the sight of the Malfoys wasn't one of those feelings.

Lucius Malfoy nodded at her, as though to say that, yes, she should apologize, and then guided his wife up the steps. Indigena eyed them as they glided past her. Narcissa's white hand dangled within an inch of hers for a few moments, as the Malfoys had to pause to let more spectators flow past them. Indigena could reach out and grip it.

And the thorny rose she wore wrapped around her wrist could animate, digging its spines into Narcissa's palm and pumping in a few drops of poison that would hurt no more than a hard pinch and leave no mark. She'd be dead in a few hours.

Indigena would have done it, too—she believed in slaying one's enemies, not toying with them—but Lord Voldemort had claimed the right of killing all traitors, and he had promised Bellatrix Lestrange that she could have Narcissa. Indigena knew the requirements of honor perfectly well, since it was what had made her a Death Eater in the first place. She could not take a kill someone else had marked as his or her own.

She would have, instead, to enjoy the knowledge that death had come within an inch of Narcissa Malfoy today, and she had never realized it.

Indigena climbed to her seat in a silent, thoughtful mood, but only until she remembered her experimental thorns. Then she smiled. She

could entertain herself until the trial began by thinking about how big they would soon grow, how much poison they were likely to store, and whether Evan Rosier was in very much pain right now as he writhed on them, pierced through the back and abdomen.

Harry lifted his head as he entered the courtroom. There was definitely an advantage to having been here before, though neither of the occasions he'd been inside it—for Fudge's trial, and for Snape's—was very pleasant. He had at least expected the bare stone walls, and the flickering torches, and the staring crowd, and the chair with chains in the center.

Of course, since he wasn't a criminal being tried but a "victim," as they insisted on calling him, the Wizengamot had conjured another chair for him. This sat not far from the one with chains, still almost in the center of the room, but it was lower and had a cushion on it. Harry took his seat.

He leaned back and tilted his head to meet the eyes of the staring Wizengamot, and the eyes from the visitors' galleries. He hadn't realized there would be quite so many people. Of course, with the Prophet and other newspapers having covered the story in breathless anticipation for so many months, interest would be high when the time for his parents' sentencing finally came.

Harry curled his lip. They think they're here to see me weeping and breaking down, the helpless child they've portrayed in all their articles. Well, I'm not going to. Even if I have to make myself look completely unsympathetic, I'm not going to break down.

He knew Snape and Draco, the Malfoys and his other allies, were up there somewhere. He knew they probably hoped, though for a different reason from the rest of the crowd, that he wouldn't maintain his mask. Harry intended to disappoint them, too.

"Attention," said a quavering voice enhanced by Sonorus charms. "Attention, wizards, witches, and gentlebeings. If you will sit down, please?"

Harry lifted his head to look at the old wizard standing near the front of the Wizengamot's platform, shuffling some papers in front of him. Harry didn't know him. He was extremely small, with barely any wisps of hair clinging to his head, and he wore a pince-nez. Harry nodded. They probably couldn't find anyone else to lead the questioning. Most of the Wizengamot were either against me or too closely connected with me, and of course Scrimgeour can't lead it himself. I suppose this one is neutral.

"My name is Tofty Sapiention," announced the old wizard. "I am an Elder of the Wizengamot, and I will lead the portion of the trial that consists of Mr. Potter's questioning." Harry could feel his eyebrows rise. They're not having the same person lead it all the way through? That's unusual. "Please, sit down and be quiet. There must be no interruptions while we proceed."

Harry relaxed a bit. So far, Mr. Sapiention sounded just like all the books of proceedings on child abuse trials Harry had read. He might not be the questioner all the time, but while he was, it seemed likely that he would be fussy and adhere to strict rules. That was just the kind of person Harry would want questioning him.

"A warning," said Sapiention, and stared in the direction of a pair of witches who wouldn't stop gossiping. When they finally stopped, he gave them a nod and continued. "Some of the memories discussed in this courtroom today will be extremely hurtful. Please depart now if you feel unable to hold the contents of your temper, your wand, or your stomach. Once we begin, the door will be locked, and no one will be permitted to leave until Mr. Potter's testimony is complete."

Harry listened, but it didn't sound as though anyone were leaving. Of course, the observers would have come here today knowing it was a child abuse case.

"Very well," said Sapiention, and spoke the spell that would lock the courtroom's doors. Harry shivered, but tried not to let the echoing boom get to him. He wouldn't feel trapped. The spell wasn't locking him in here with the past; it was locking him in here with the future. This was his chance to get as much for his parents as he could obtain.

“Mr. Potter.”

Harry leaned a little further back in the chair and looked up again. He noticed the chair molding itself to his head, so that he wouldn't hurt his neck continually craning it to see. He made a mental note to thank whoever had constructed the chair like that, if he ever found out.

Sapientian's voice was gentle. “Please let me know at any time if you are unwilling to speak. It is our intent today to learn the truth, but not our intent to make you feel uncomfortable.”

Too late for that. Snape already did it by spreading the news to the papers. But Harry checked his bitterness. It might escape him during the trial, and that would be utterly disastrous. He nodded, instead, to show he understood.

“Now, I must ask: Are you willing to testify under Veritaserum?”

Harry shook his head. He knew the question was procedural only—very few child abuse victims chose the truth potion—but he did feel a brief, fleeting regret. If he could have convinced them that what he felt was true beyond a doubt...

But he would convince them that everything he felt was true beyond a doubt, and that was the problem with that. Harry shoved his anger down again and waited patiently for the first question.

Tofty Sapientian looked at his notes for a moment, then took a deep breath and said, “Mr. Potter, please describe the way Lily and James Potter, your parents, raised you.”

Harry relaxed further. This was the kind of open question that gave him a lot of room to play in, the kind he'd been hoping for.

“Guardedly,” he said. “We lived in a small house near Godric's Hollow, behind tight isolation wards, from the time my twin brother Connor Potter and I were one and a half to the day we started Hogwarts. The isolation wards were constructed out of fear of Voldemort—a collective flinch from the court, which Harry thought would get tiresome soon—returning, and his Death Eaters seeking revenge.

My parents, of course, feared for Connor's life, and so, in addition to keeping him protected from the outside world, they trained me to be his defender."

Sapientian moved on to the next question. "Is it true that you had no choice in becoming his guardian, Mr. Potter?"

Harry kept the scowl off his face. Though they weren't leading the questioning, other members of the Wizengamot and the Minister would have had the chance to make up questions. He would bet anything that that particular one came from Scrimgeour, or maybe Madam Marchbanks.

"It is true that my training began very young, from the night that Voldemort attacked," he said, and rolled his eyes as more people flinched. It's a name. If they're that afraid of his name, of his shadow, how are they ever going to fight him?

Sapientian frowned slightly. "That's not what the question asked, Mr. Potter."

Harry spread his arms. "I was raised to believe in it," he said simply. "Many wizarding parents raise their children to believe in many different things, Elder Sapientian. Pureblood purity, for instance, or the need to keep our world safe and secret from Muggles, or the superiority of one Quidditch team over another." That got a chuckle from some people in the galleries, but they echoed in a mostly confused silence; Harry knew he wasn't reacting the way most of the spectators had expected him to. "In most cases, from the time they can talk, or not much after it. Would you describe them as not having a choice? I had the same lack of choice as they did, or the same freedom. I was raised in a certain way. That way made me what I am. Do I wish that my parents had chosen some different methods? Undoubtedly." He released just a bit of his anger from the Occlumency pools then, to flavor his voice. It wouldn't do to let them think he was emotionless about this. "But I cannot say I am sorry for everything I learned."

"Describe your training in detail for the court, Mr. Potter."

Another wide-open question. I do like Sapientian.

“I was raised to be my brother’s guardian,” said Harry. “To stay in the shadows while defending him; I was to present an ordinary front to the world, and never let anyone know that I was skilled in doing what I was. I expected I would lay down my life for him someday. There was a War coming, and my mother told me the Boy-Who-Lived had to survive to fight the Dark Lord. To do that, he needed his love and innocence intact. I was the one who would stand between Connor and the world, and I promised to do it.”

He could see a few of the Wizengamot members exchanging glances. Harry hid a smile. Good. It’s all in the way I present things. Snape got them on his side by twisting everything around. He can’t blame me for doing the same thing.

Sapientian rustled through another series of notes. Then he made a soft sound and said, “Ah! Mr. Potter, I am now going to lift a memory from the Pensieve that was turned over to me and place it in the air above the courtroom. Don’t worry,” he hastened to add. “Only yourself and the Wizengamot members will be able to see it.”

Harry tipped his head, and watched as Sapientian put his wand in a shallow bowl in front of him and then flicked it up, causing a spray of silvery droplets to animate and take form in the air above his head. Harry could see people from the galleries craning their necks, and heard many groans of disappointment. He ignored them, and watched as his mother and his younger self came into view, kneeling together in the fall of sunshine through a window. Lily had her hands clasped around his. Harry thought, from the look of his face, that he was six or so.

“A new morning,” Lily whispered to him, with that intensity Harry had always loved. It made him feel they were playing a special secret game together, practicing an art that no one else in the whole world knew about. He shifted in the chair, emotions he hadn’t felt in years returning to him. If he had managed to keep everything secret, if he had followed Connor into Gryffindor, then perhaps he could still have

felt that, that intense and hidden pride that would have let him stand in a corner and not be noticed.

I'm allowed to regret it, he thought defensively.

"A new day," the Lily in the image continued to the Harry in the image. "So many possibilities for renewal and rebirth. Can you recite your vows for me, Harry? I'd like to hear them renewed."

Image-Harry nodded and began to say them. Harry mouthed them along with him. The words were still so ingrained in his head that, though it had been years since he'd recited them daily, he knew them like the beat of his heart.

"To keep Connor safe. To always protect him. To insure that he lives as untroubled a life as he can, until he has to face Lord Voldemort again." The little breath in the middle, that Harry thought signaled his mother's fear, and then they continued. "To be his brother and his friend and his guardian. To love him. To never compete with him, never show him up, and never let anyone else know that I'm so close to him. To be ordinary, so that he can be extraordinary."

The image dissolved. Harry blinked and glanced up at Sapiention. He had thought the Wizengamot would choose something more injurious to his parents' cause than just something he'd done every day.

Sapiention's voice shook as he spoke. Harry didn't know why. "Are all those vows true, Mr. Potter? You kept them all?"

Harry shrugged. "I attempted to keep them all. They were disrupted my first year at Hogwarts, when I was Sorted into Slytherin House, which my mother hadn't planned on." More words were burning on his tongue, about Snape and how he'd forced Harry to do various things that broke the vow of ordinariness, but he refrained. Say those things, and they'd just think he was still damaged.

"But—" Sapiention paused a moment, as if he were trying to think of how to phrase the next question. Harry was surprised. Isn't he just reading off a prepared list? "The last two as well?"

Merlin! Why is it always those last two that bother everyone? Harry nodded. "Yes. Every one of them."

"And how did you feel about this?"

Harry felt for traps in the question. "At what age, sir?" he asked finally.

"At the age you made them." Sapiention nodded jerkily at thin air, as though he'd forgotten he'd dismissed the image. "At the age you were in the Pensieve."

Harry shrugged. "I welcomed them, sir. I believed in them absolutely. I knew that someone paying attention to me could mean that I wouldn't be as effective a guardian to Connor. Either the Death Eaters might see me as an enemy, and then I wouldn't be able to surprise them, or I might get dragged into friendships and alliances and other commitments that had nothing to do with my brother. Of course, now I realize that's wrong," he added, barely resisting the temptation to make his voice a sing-song.

"So you were to be focused on your brother absolutely?" Sapiention asked, his voice so soft that for a moment Harry thought he would have to ask him to repeat the question. "He was to be your life?"

"Yes," said Harry. He felt uneasiness rising up his back, tickling at his spine. He thought he'd lost control of the conversation, but he wasn't sure how. He swallowed and leaned back on the chair, then sat forward again, then forced himself to stay still. He didn't want to look either as if he were taking a defensive posture nor as if he were squirming in his seat.

"Why?" Sapiention whispered. "What could possibly have been worth this?"

"A prophecy," said Harry. "A prophecy that marked my brother as the savior, and his elder twin brother as his powerful guardian. My parents were raising me, as they thought, in tune with the strict guidelines of fate. If my brother wasn't guarded, then he would have fallen."

“What did the prophecy say?”

Dread thickened Harry’s throat like wine. He couldn’t let the full knowledge of the prophecy out into the world, not when Voldemort might learn of it. “I never heard the full wording, sir,” he lied. “I only know that that was the reasoning my parents gave, and so did Albus Dumbledore. None of them ever said anything to make me think they had any other main reason.”

Sapientian sorted through his notes one more time, then frowned and said, “But here is a memory that may prove otherwise.” He flicked his wand through the Pensieve again, and another image took shape.

Harry barely resisted the temptation to snarl. He knew this one. He’d seen it before. It was the memory of the time that Dumbledore had put the phoenix web on him, when he was four years old.

He sat through it in stony silence. He’d hated it the first time he saw it, and he still hated it, but he hated more the purpose it was being used for. He knew what Sapientian was going to ask next.

He realized he had his arms folded when the Wizengamot Elder dismissed the memory and turned back to him. He unfolded them, but made no other gesture. He probably looked too stiff, and his body language was giving him away already. Harry released a frustrated hiss of breath that should be too soft for anyone else to pick up, even with the courtroom’s excellent acoustics. I can’t believe I’m being knocked down already. What in the world happened to holding strong?

“This, Mr. Potter,” said Sapientian softly, “looks rather as if your parents and Albus Dumbledore imprisoned your magic because they feared you, and trained you as a sacrifice to make sure that you would never turn on them. They treated you as little more than a thing, a tool.”

Harry bit his lip. To speak now would be to spill words that he didn’t want to say.

"You mentioned that I need only tell you if I was feeling uncomfortable, Elder Sapientian," he said after a moment. "I am."

"Do you wish to stop the questioning?" The Elder's voice was quiet, respectful, and Harry knew that he would if Harry wished it.

And Harry almost said yes, but then he remembered: this was the only chance that he would get to influence the court. For the rest of the trial, witnesses for defense and prosecution would speak, but he was neither. Pensieve memories would be shown, and challenges given by biased observers like Snape, with no counterbalance of his explanation.

He shook his head. "No."

"Then I will continue with the questioning," said Sapientian. "This explanation, of treating you like a tool or a weapon, has been presented to the Wizengamot by those who submitted the memory. Would you agree with it, Mr. Potter? Or would you give a different interpretation?"

Harry closed his eyes. He knew one truth that could make them dismiss that explanation forever. But to reveal himself as the Boy-Who-Lived and Voldemort's magical heir would be to cast doubts on the truth of the prophecy, and then the Wizengamot would only look more deeply for convoluted reasons as to his mother's training, when Harry had already told them the true reasoning behind it. She'd been afraid, and she'd thought she was obeying fate and the ethics that Dumbledore had trained her into. That was all, but they would dream up some outlook that made her a criminal mastermind. Harry knew they would.

So give them part of the truth and not the whole thing. You can do that, can't you?

"I turned out to have several dangerous abilities," he said simply. "My mother, as you heard from the memory, was frightened by the fact that I often Vanished things. What if I had Vanished my brother, or the house? I was too young to realize that some types of magic

should be carefully restricted in use. The phoenix web took some of my abilities away from me until I was ready to use them.”

“And when was that point to have been reached?” Sapiention questioned sternly.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t think that my mother or Dumbledore ever mentioned a specific age.”

“But we did just hear Dumbledore saying that the web would reweave your mind to its purpose,” Sapiention said. Harry could see his hand shaking as he picked up another piece of paper, but he didn’t think it was from either age or fear. “Is that true?”

“That is what happened,” Harry acknowledged unwillingly. “For a time, my whole mind was shaped as webs. The phoenix web was at the very bottom of them all. I suppose that would count as weaving my mind.”

Sapiention made a small noise that Harry thought meant he was ill. Harry found himself clutching the arm of his chair so hard his hand hurt, and removed it, flexing it slowly open and closed so that his fingers wouldn’t cramp. The Many snake around his throat gave a little wriggle that said she wanted to get down and bite whoever was upsetting Harry. Harry switched to stroking her the moment he thought he’d exercised his fingers enough.

Calmness was my goal when I came in here. Why am I finding it so hard to attain?

He was trying a routine of breaths that should smooth the bubbling surface of his Occlumency pools when Sapiention said, “Would you describe the effects of the phoenix web for the court, Mr. Potter?”

Harry twitched. They aren’t going to like this, either. But he didn’t think he could lie. At least some of the Pensieve memories would center on the web, and it seemed that Sapiention knew them well, if he’d immediately plucked out one of them to look at. “It bound my magic,” he said. “It bound my loyalty to my brother. It also made me unaware of itself. It was supposed to remain secret, a last line of

defense; mostly, my mother and Dumbledore counted on my conditioning to make me loyal. But certain—events—in my second year brought it up out of the depths of my mind, and after that it broke. It was still focused on my brother, but it gave me pain, headaches mostly, every time I thought too deeply about going against my mother and Dumbledore's wishes on the matter."

"It made you into a slave," Sapientian summarized.

"No!" Harry sat up, frowning. "A slave can't break free of his confinement. I could. Once I learned about the phoenix web, I managed it."

"Slavery is not based on whether one can break one's own chains, Mr. Potter," said the Elder.

Harry sat back and thought rebelliously on whether they would consider house elves and goblins to be enslaved for that reason, and what the reaction of the court would be if he asked that. But he checked the impulse. He was not about to reveal secrets or debase his work as vates by comparing what had happened to him for a decade to the years and years of suffering endured by the house elves and goblins.

Control yourself, damn it!

Harry lifted his eyes back to Sapientian and said, "I'm ready for the next question, sir."

"There are many mentions in the court's notes of your being trained as a sacrifice, Mr. Potter," said Sapientian, shuffling through some more of the papers. "You've described a few of the consequences for us. What were others?"

Harry let out a little shuddering breath. He could do this, right? He had acknowledged that the sacrificial training hindered him as much as it helped him, that it was wrong. And if he could just pick the right words and make the Wizengamot see that it wasn't all bad, then he might stand a chance of lessening their hatred towards his mother.

“I was trained to give up my life for my brother if necessary,” he said. “Leap in front of curses for him, but that was only the most obvious way. Make sure that I had no friends that came before him, or indeed any at all. That would have been the best-case scenario. No amusements that would detract from his position in my life. No concerns that could displace him from always hovering in front of my eyes.”

“I understand that you both play Quidditch on the school teams in Hogwarts, Mr. Potter,” said Sapientian. “How does that work, if you were trained not to compete with your brother in anything?”

Harry could have kissed the Elder for asking a question like that. He relaxed completely as he replied, “Obviously I’ve overcome some of my training, Elder, haven’t I? I can compete with Connor now, and it doesn’t bother me.”

“But in the first years?” Sapientian pushed.

Harry hesitated. Then he said, “I made attempts to give the Quidditch victories to my brother.”

“When did that change?”

“In third year,” said Harry.

“And what happened then?”

How can I go into this, without revealing what happened to Sirius? “I would prefer not to answer that question, Elder.”

Sapientian nodded, and Harry could see the shadows of other nodding heads moving behind him. Too late, he realized he should have answered the question in such a way as would leave key details of Sirius’s madness and possession out. With his refusal, they just thought that he wanted to skip the details of his healing, as if he were ashamed of them.

Sapientian continued before Harry could object. "I understand that your mother's abuse of you was primarily mental and emotional, Mr. Potter, and your father's abuse of you primarily neglectful?"

"It was all mental and emotional," Harry said sharply, "and all neglect on my father's part." I don't want them thinking otherwise, and damn Sapientian for trying to do that, anyway. Skeeter said neglect and mental abuse weren't as common in the wizarding world. That means that there's the chance the Wizengamot won't take this as seriously, and will downplay the punishment for my parents' crimes.

"And yet..." said Sapientian, and then waved his wand. Another image took form. Harry recognized this one. He stood in front of a cleared space on the wall, where a bookshelf would normally rest. He didn't want to chance missing and hurting the books if his spell went wrong.

Harry watched as his younger self intoned the incantation for the Blood Whip Curse, and the stripes formed on his back, cutting the same thin lines that he'd healed when Marietta used the spell. His younger self bit his lip and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, but resisted the temptation to cry out, mastering and riding the pain. Lily, of course, had told him it was always all right to scream under torture, because lost pride was worth less than lost life or limbs, but it had been a matter of pride for Harry to learn to resist pain without much of a pause. If someone used that curse on him in battle, then he needed to be able to accept it and still make his way to Connor's side.

The image faded. Harry realized his hand was clenched again, and the Many snake had slid from his neck to his arm. He shook his head, and turned his hand back along his arm to pet her. Dimly, he wondered why in the world the Ministry officials on the door hadn't demanded that he leave her behind in their care. He supposed they might have thought she was just a decorative necklace or band.

"Mr. Potter." Sapientian's voice came as if from far away, breaking and booming in on the silence that had filled his ears. "Will you tell the court how old you were in that image?"

Harry remembered. The memories were dangling in his mind, suspended like crystals in a glass of seawater. He took a deep breath. "Seven," he said.

Loud and angry sounds came from many of the onlookers around him. Harry closed his eyes and lowered his head to bury it against his arm. He knew it was an expression of weakness, but right now he didn't think that he could stand meeting the eyes that were looking at him.

"So your mother had you inflicting pain curses on yourself at seven years old?" Sapiention demanded.

Harry sat up. He could see now how Sapiention was trying to blur the lines, and he'd already known why. Make the Wizengamot think that it had been physical abuse, and he'd get an arrest more easily. But Harry was determined not to let him get away with that. If his mother was going to be imprisoned, then it had to be for what she'd actually done.

"It was my choice, sir," he said. "I knew that I needed training in enduring pain. So I chose to go the route of pain curses."

"Did your mother watch?" Sapiention asked.

"Some of the time," said Harry. "When the curse was a particularly bloody one, as that one was, she came up with a healing spell when I'd mastered the pain for a few minutes." He felt an emotion he couldn't even identify bubbling up in him like boiling water. He closed his eyes and tried to put a lid on it.

He didn't get the chance, because Sapiention was asking, "Mr. Potter, what would you have done had she encouraged your brother to use such curses on himself?"

"Damn it!" Harry winced when he realized that he'd said that aloud. He tried to hurry on before the stares coming at him could actively pierce him and force him not to continue. "I would have attacked her, of course. You saw my training. You know that she encouraged me to protect my brother."

“And if she had used such pain curses on another child?”

Harry made a deep, unhappy sound. The boiling emotion had got out of its pot and was flowing about him, making him feel sick and light-headed.

“Mr. Potter?” Sapiention’s voice had lost its steel. “Do you wish to stop?”

And then James and Lily will die.

Harry sat back up and shook his head. “I’m fine, Elder,” he said, even as he knew the pallor of his face and the shake in his voice belied that. “I can do this.”

“Please answer my question, then.” Sapiention was sounding as if he wished he had never asked it, which was at least something, Harry supposed.

“If she had used such pain curses on another child, I would have interfered,” said Harry. “I was taught that only the Dark Lord’s minions did such things. I would have thought that someone was using a glamour to appear as my mother, or perhaps Polyjuice. I knew about such things. I would have bound the offender down until my real mother could appear and reveal herself.”

“So your mother told you histories of the First War, and of You-Know-Who’s torturers?” Sapiention finished, turning another page.

“Yes.” Harry hoped they would follow this subject. He was sure that it was a less dangerous one.

Sapiention nodded. It was only a moment later that Harry realized the motion was more akin to a fishing bird spearing its prey. “So you would have considered the use of such pain curses on your brother and other children as harm, but not on yourself?”

Harry turned his head away. “I don’t think you really understand, Elder,” he said, with all the calm he could muster.

“Mr. Potter, I wish with all my heart to be wrong about this,” said Sapientian softly. “That is why we give abused children a chance to tell their own stories, because they know many things that none of us will understand, being outside those situations. But, without such speech from you, I am only stating what I see: that your mother taught you to believe yourself the exception to all the rules that normally govern children. You consider others as normal and would protect them from pain, but not yourself. It did not matter what you suffered, so long as it was in the cause of serving your brother. Is this correct?”

Harry knew he was a few inches from vomiting. And, damn it, his Occlumency pools were breaking apart. He just knew that he was going to cry or scream any moment. A particularly vicious rage had linked Sapientian’s words to what Vera had told him last year, that he thought of himself as less than human, and was now suggesting, with a force and clarity Harry had never seen before, that his mother was the source of that attitude, that she was the reason he didn’t think of himself as human, and that that was wrong.

Harry could feel his calmness slipping away, but more, he could sense his commitment to defending his parents slipping away. If the interrogation continued, he thought, with numb horror, he was likely to say evil things about them, things that would prejudice the court against them and confirm his worst fears.

“Elder,” he said, when he thought he had control of his voice. It still wavered and cracked.

“Yes, Mr. Potter?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can continue,” said Harry. He had to get out of the courtroom, and now. He wasn’t really worried about his anger destroying anyone there, but the rage had gathered its strength, whispering that he had a perfect right to testify against his parents and try to condemn them if he wanted. If he stayed, then the rage would make sure it destroyed Lily and James, not by lashing out with magic, but by speaking with his voice.

“Very well, Mr. Potter.” Sapiention’s voice was filled with respect. It made Harry want to laugh hysterically. Would he respect me if he knew the reason I’m ending the interrogation now? “The doors by which you entered are unlocked now. Please go to them. Ministry Aurors will escort you to your guardian.”

Harry stood up hastily, keeping his head bowed as he strode to the doors. His eyes were blurred, and the Many snake was hissing and sliding up and down his arm, but it was done.

Even if you didn’t save them. Even if, in fact, you’ve condemned them to death with your behavior.

The Auror named Wilmot who’d escorted him into the Ministry was waiting for him. He gently placed a hand on Harry’s shoulder when he would have turned blindly up the wrong corridor, and murmured, “This way, Mr. Potter.”

Harry let himself be guided. He didn’t know what to think of, what to want. When he reached Snape, he knew he wouldn’t have repaired his mask sufficiently. Snape would insist on comforting him, probably talking to him, maybe giving him a sleeping draught. Harry knew that he needed to stay awake and recover, though. They were bringing his parents into the courtroom next. He needed to return and see them.

“You will always have people at your back, Mr. Potter.”

Harry glanced back at Wilmot, thinking that maybe this was a threat, perhaps from Voldemort. He would welcome the distraction of fighting for his life at this point. He thought it was easier for him than what he’d gone through in the courtroom.

But Wilmot was smiling at him, and he reached up and touched his eyes. Harry blinked as he removed the lenses that must have been covering them, and revealed amber eyes under the normal-looking hazel.

“You’re—“ Harry whispered.

"A werewolf, yes." Wilmot kept his voice low and soothing. "One who considers you vates, and who is therefore on your side." He paused and tilted his head. "I trust that you won't reveal me."

Harry shook his head in a daze. He couldn't imagine how a werewolf had managed to get and keep a Ministry job under Scrimgeour, but there it was. He could hardly betray him. Scrimgeour would sack him immediately. The anti-werewolf laws said that no lycanthrope could hold a paying job.

Wilmot winked at him, and returned the lenses to his eyes. "Someday," he said, "when all of this is past, I will introduce you to the London werewolves and the other refugees who have formed the packs. All of us think you're the most interesting thing that's happened for werewolves in generations, and the best chance."

Harry nodded. And perhaps Wilmot had known this, and perhaps he hadn't, but the reminder of the larger life Harry led outside the courtroom was working. He felt as if he were walking more steadily on his feet, and his breathing was calmer.

"Harry."

And there was Snape, hastening to meet him. Wilmot stepped back with a little bow, and Harry found himself ensconced in Snape's embrace. It said something about how worried he was, Harry knew, that he was hugging him in front of a complete stranger.

"Come with me," Snape whispered into Harry's ear. "I think you need a few hours away from the court, and then—"

"I can't," said Harry, yanking at his arms now. "They're bringing in Lily next."

Snape stared down at him with fathomless dark eyes. "And do you really think that you're strong enough to face seeing her?"

Harry turned his head away. "That's not the point," he said, knowing his voice sounded as harsh as the croak of a desert bird. "I have to know what she says. I can't miss a single moment of this trial."

“Harry,” said Snape, softly now. “Isn’t your mental health more important than what happens to your parents?”

“How can you say that?” Harry glared at him. “It’s my mental health compared to someone else’s life and freedom we’re talking about.”

“Someone else is always the key,” said Snape, as if he were talking to himself, but he held up his hand when Harry started to protest. “We will go back inside,” he said. “But the moment you start to hurt too badly, Harry, I will remove you from the court. And that is hurting in my estimation, not yours.”

Harry swallowed and began working on his emotions, tucking them away into his Occlumency pools again. He’d failed once. He had no excuse for failing a second time. At the very least, if his mother were going to be condemned, he wanted to be there to act as a witness.

Why couldn’t I have held strong? It would have been so simple. It seemed so simple when I was entering the Ministry.

He carefully ignored the rage that sat in the center of him now like a great crab, and gripped the idea that Lily had made him think of himself as a tool like a revelation. He ignored, even more carefully, the ripples that that idea was sending through him, what old assumptions it was smashing, what holes it was ripping in his defenses that there were just barriers of a special kind between him and other people.

Perhaps, by the end of it, he would see that he did deserve the same kind of consideration as others, and that terrified him for what it would mean.

But he was not going to think about that right now. He walked up to the galleries of the courtroom, Snape’s arm tight and warm around his shoulders, and just as they entered, he saw the Aurors bring his mother out.

Chapter Forty-Two: Forgive Us Our Virtues

Lily had been gazing out the windows of her cell—which she knew were fake, since the Ministry was underground—for long hours when the Aurors came to fetch her. Currently, the windows showed a lake scene not dissimilar to the one at Hogwarts, lashed with rain. The sky was only cloudy in one place, though. In others, pale autumn or wintry sunlight shone through, licking at the bellies of the clouds with golden tongues and touching Lily's heart like hope.

She had cried herself to sleep last night, and then she had sat up this morning with a gasp, as she remembered that today was the trial which might end her life. Then she sank back, trembling, against the pillow, and closed her eyes weakly. Her hands clenched and closed convulsively around each other.

But that was this morning. Now was the time just before the Aurors had warned her she was going to be fetched to the courtroom, and Lily had cried herself out, and put herself into a rudimentary state of hope, like the sun shining through the clouds.

A perfunctory knock sounded at the door, accompanying the falling of the wards. "Potter? Come on."

Lily kept her face as blank as possible as the Aurors came in. Of course they had sent the two who were nastiest to her outside of Mallory herself: Dawlish and Proudfoot. Dawlish had survived Scrimgeour's purge of the Aurors in spite of his loyalty to Fudge. He apparently loved the Ministry more, and had accustomed himself to the new Minister. And Proudfoot was simply impossible to get along with, as Lily had found. He foamed and snapped even when she was polite to him. He had been a Hufflepuff, and seemed to disdain sacrificing any family member, even if she'd done it for the good of the world.

"On your feet, Potter," Dawlish said when she didn't stand up right away, and then nudged her in the back with his wand. He was so efficient, which was the most intolerable thing about him. He acted as if he didn't care that she might die today. "The Wizengamot's waiting for you."

Proudfoot didn't speak, but gave her the glare he'd perfected over the last few days. Lily tried not to let it get to her as she moved to the door. She did look back one more time, to catch a glimpse of the sunlight out the enchanted windows, and to remember her plan.

Training Harry to value forgiveness as much as they had had been part of Albus's suggestion to make him the perfect diplomat for Connor. He had to be able to forgive Death Eaters and others whose pasts had been questionable if he wanted to lure Dark families to the side of the Light. And, as Albus had explained to her only once, because of course what they had done was not wrong, the training would also make it easier for Harry to forgive them if someone ever found out about his childhood and tried to convince him that they'd done something terrible.

"He will be incapable of condemning you, Lily, no matter what happens." Albus's voice throbbed in her ears, soft and reassuring, as she trod the path to the courtrooms. Dawlish paused along the way to spell fetters onto her wrists, when Proudfoot reminded him to do it. "We need no magical coercion to insure that. Spells can be broken. Psychological patterns take a good deal more effort. He will love you, and forgive you, if you come to the point where everyone else condemns you. You never should—it is my hope that one day everyone will know how we have trained Harry, and honor his contribution to the good of our world—but someone might yet break through the secrecy and think they should interfere with what they don't understand. No one outside Godric's Hollow save me can ever truly comprehend what you have gone through, Lily. Should they bring the force of that incomprehension down upon you, do not despair, so long as Harry is still alive. He should come for you. He should free you."

Lily let those words repeat in her mind over and over, and by the time they reached the courtroom, she had heard them three times, and she believed them as much as she ever had. She waited patiently while the doors swung open, and Dawlish and Proudfoot guided her to the prisoner's chair. Of course, chains came up at once to circle her arms and legs, and it seemed that Madam Amelia Bones, who'd

stared at her coldly the whole time during her initial interrogation, was going to be leading the questioning.

It is all right. Their harsh treatment does not matter. Is Harry here?

Her eyes caught a movement near the door in the visitors' gallery above, and she smiled slightly as she saw Harry coming in. She would have known her son's stride anywhere.

As Madam Bones told people to take their places, thanked Dawlish and Proudfoot roughly, and then moved to begin the questioning, Lily settled back. Harry has magic powerful enough to destroy the courtroom if he wants—certainly powerful enough to break my chains and free me, and keep me safe from anyone who might try to come after me. I need only remind him of that.

Harry could see his mother intensely well. He'd created a small window in his palm, as he had before, so that he could view what happened on the floor of the courtroom without craning his neck. Lily was sitting almost comfortably in the chair, her head tilted back so that she could watch the galleries. Harry thought she'd seen him, though he sat far enough behind the balcony railing that that should have been impossible, and Snape's presence at his side would tend to obscure him even more.

It doesn't matter. We could always tell each other's presence in a room. Why should that have changed?

Harry could feel his breath racing in and out of his lungs, and he was almost glad not to have two hands now, or he would be continually wiping one free of sweat. As it was, he settled back in his seat, ignoring the stare Snape fixed on him, and regarded the window in his palm.

Lily looked paler than normal, and the circles under her green eyes were pronounced. Harry swallowed. I don't think this is about to get any easier for her. He wished he could go down to her, but he didn't think the Wizengamot would permit him to do so.

Besides, Snape would probably zap him into immobility and force Sleeping Draughts down his throat if he tried anything like that.

“Lily Evans Potter.” Madam Bones’s voice trembled with disgust as she spoke. Harry wondered why they had to have her lead the questioning. Why not someone else? The thought that Madam Bones was the least prejudiced person on the Wizengamot where this case was concerned hurt, and made his hopes for his parents’ future sink lower. “You are on trial for the abuse of your son Harry Potter, mentally and emotionally, and, indirectly, through magic. Do you deny the charges?”

“I do,” Harry heard his mother’s voice say, strong and lovely and prouder than he would have thought it could be. She sounded as if she were speaking the way she had once spoken to him of war and sacrifice, but this time the whole world could hear. She might finally have an audience worthy of the grand truths she was speaking, Harry thought. Yes, what she had done about those truths was wrong, but they still deserved to be heard. “I did not abuse him. I trained him to survive the war with Lord Voldemort—” the collective flinch Harry found so silly “—and I trained him to be his own person, devoted to his brother, ignoring the lies of the outside world. My training did not work, but I do not regret what I have done.”

Harry shifted around. He had wondered if his mother would repeat the regrets she’d expressed in her letters to him: that she would have trained him differently if she had known that he was the one who reflected Voldemort’s Killing Curse. But she seemed to have decided, even as he had, that it would do no good for the truth of the prophecy to get back to their enemy. She would speak as if the version of the prophecy she had believed for thirteen years was the true one, then. Something in Harry unclenched and relaxed.

“There is a Pensieve memory I wish to show,” said Madam Bones, and flicked her wand through the Pensieve on the stand before her. Harry watched as droplets arched over the railing, and then watched them in his window as they coalesced. He knew that the memory should probably still have been invisible to anyone but the Wizengamot and Lily, but he reached out with an effort of will, and broke the simple ward that kept him from seeing it.

It was a surprisingly ordinary memory to choose, really. Lily was testing him; he was about eight years old in the scene, Harry thought, and it was during the two months she had had him go without touching anyone, to get him used to the lonely life he would have to lead. She sat in a chair in the main room of the house at Godric's Hollow, reading, and he sat next to her on a stool, with a book on defensive magic in his hands.

They were only a few inches parted. He could reach out and touch her if he wanted to.

That had been the test, Harry remembered. Lily had seen him avoid casual brushes of the hand from Sirius and Remus and Connor with satisfaction; she had seen the way he avoided coming to her for a good-night hug. Now she wanted to see what he would do with temptation right in front of him.

Harry could make out the fine tremors in his own body. It had been surprisingly hard, harder than he thought it should be with as secretive as he had already been, to simply ignore the impulse to touch someone. It would have made him feel better, though, as Lily had pointed out many times, that was an indulgence he couldn't afford, just doing things to feel better. His life was given over to a greater purpose.

Harry remembered this memory. He knew what came next. He winced—not because of what would happen, but because of how he knew the court was going to take it.

His younger self broke and reached out to touch his mother's knee. Lily moved at once. She'd been waiting for that, Harry remembered, though her gaze had seemed to be on her book the whole time.

Younger-Harry lowered his eyes at once, the way he'd always done when he displeased his mother.

"Harry." Lily's voice was a whip. "Look at me."

He looked up at her. Lily shook her head at him.

"You need to learn more control," she said softly. "What will happen if you give in to that same carelessness around a Death Eater? You could be killed, Harry, with just a cut from a knife or a simple curse from a wand. It wouldn't have to travel very far. And then what would Connor do?"

Younger-Harry swallowed, and then said, "But you're not a Death Eater." Older-Harry thought it a feeble argument, all these years later. Of course, he'd had those impulses he still didn't understand, unable to think why someone else human under his hands would feel so good.

"No," said Lily, "but neither will the other children in Gryffindor House be, and they could still trap you and distract you. What would happen if you were being hugged, and couldn't make it to Connor's side on time? What would happen if a friend snagged your hand when you are about to charge into battle, insisting that you couldn't jump between him and a curse, and he died? What then, Harry?"

Younger-Harry shrank. Older-Harry closed his eyes. He could hear the Wizengamot making noises of outrage. Madam Bones knew what she was doing when she chose this memory, all right. Damnit. I wish they were using Draco's enhanced Pensieve spell. Then they'd know why she was doing this. They'd be able to understand it much better.

"The world would fall," Younger-Harry whispered.

"That's right." Older-Harry opened his eyes to see Memory-Lily nod at his hand. "No touching, Harry. I know this is a hard lesson, but it's just one of many you'll have to learn. And it doesn't really hurt as much as a curse, does it?" She flashed him a smile, and Younger-Harry smiled back. It had been one of the rare evenings when Sirius, Remus, James, and Connor were all out playing on the lawn, and so Harry and Lily could speak freely of the secret they shared.

"That's right," he said.

"Good boy," said Lily, and climbed back onto her chair. Younger-Harry directed his attention to the book, determined not to break faith

again. And he hadn't, Harry remembered, with a feeling like a band of fire circling his chest. Seven weeks more that test had lasted, and he hadn't broken once.

The memory faded. Madam Bones began digging around in her papers. Harry started as someone brushed his arm, and so strong were the impressions the image had left on him that he flinched away before he thought, not wanting to be touched.

He turned to see Snape staring hard at him. Harry dropped his eyes. When Snape was concentrating hard enough, he could use Legilimency just from a gaze. Harry didn't want his emotions read right now.

"I think we should leave," said Snape.

"No," Harry whispered back, proud to hear how stern his voice was, for all its low volume. "I want to know what happens."

"You can get that from a report later," Snape said, leaning nearer as Madam Bones briefly looked up to glare at the talkers in the audience. "I meant what I said, Harry. Your mental health is not to be damaged any further. You will come with me if I think you are hurting."

"And I'm not hurting yet," Harry flared, and then looked pointedly away from Snape as Madam Bones began to ask the first of her questions.

"Reports from Madam Shiverwood of the Department of Magical Family and Child Services indicate that all children need to be touched regularly, or their growth is damaged," said Madam Bones, a stern rasp in her voice. "This is even more essential for wizard children than for Muggle children, as their magic needs to seek out the companionship of similar power, and learn to stay under a child's skin so that accidental magic stops happening. Given that, Mrs. Potter, will you really say that teaching your son to avoid touch was not abuse?"

"Harry had learned how to handle his magic from a very young age," said Lily calmly. Harry was glad that she could be calm. The most

peculiar shaking had taken up residence in his shoulders. "It was a part of his training. He did not need the contact for the same reason that other wizard children do."

Snape was making a growling sound beside Harry. Harry looked at his guardian's face, and quickly away again. Seeing such blank, vicious hatred there made it easy to remember the Death Eater Snape had been.

"So you deny that it was abuse?" Madam Bones clarified.

"I do," said Lily. "I did what I had to do to save the world. I made decisions that no one else but Albus Dumbledore has ever made. You have no right to put me on trial for this," she added unexpectedly, rising as much to her feet as the chains would allow her and sweeping her gaze across the courtroom. Harry shivered as her eyes passed across him. "None of you would have done as much. All of you would have huddled in bed while Voldemort came for you, if my sons had not borne the burden."

Probably true, Harry thought.

"Sit down, Mrs. Potter." Madam Bones's voice was flat. She waited until Lily had obeyed, then said, "Another memory."

This time, the memory that was chosen made Harry sit back hard in his chair. Merlin damn it, not this one! They're all going to think they have the right to put her to death, after this one.

He was nine, practicing wandless magic. Lily stood in the background, patiently waiting for him to finish. When he turned around again, she beckoned. Harry watched his younger self's image approach her and look up into her face. He envied, bitterly, the calmness of his own green eyes. There were times I was able to do that without Occlumency. When did they end?

"Harry, we will continue your training in chocolate today," said Lily. She unwrapped a Chocolate Frog. It immediately tried to leap out of her hand, but she held it still, slightly squashing one of its legs in the

process; it had been a summer day, and the sweet was already starting to melt. "Indicate when you are ready to me."

Younger-Harry closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Then he nodded and held out a hand.

Lily gave him the chocolate. Harry popped it into his mouth, chewing slowly. Then he murmured the spell that Lily had taught him for the sense of taste. "Acerbitas in vicem mel."

A moment later, he winced as bitterness flooded his tongue in place of the sweetness. The spell was only physical, however, and wouldn't complete his training without an added psychological pattern to back it up. Younger-Harry knew that by then, and Older-Harry watched as he applied it. In Harry as he was now, of course, the training had made the reaction impulse, without the need for a spell.

"What are you thinking of, Harry?" whispered Lily.

"Connor in danger," said Younger-Harry, and then whispered, "Adligo memoriam."

With no more than that, the idea of his brother in danger was bound to the bitterness, the memory working with the physical sense. More training would be needed, but in the end, it would insure that Harry never became lost in a physical sensation of sweetness, never entirely forgot his awareness of the world around him. Steel cords of perception would pull him up when he did.

Harry shuddered as the memory vanished, and he found himself pulled against Snape, his hair being stroked slowly. He tugged himself free at once, feeling the need to be away, on his own, free. The air away from his guardian seemed sweeter, and he breathed it gently, again avoiding Snape's eyes.

"Do you deny that you trained your son to be afraid of good physical sensations?" Madam Bones asked then.

"I don't deny that," said Lily. "I don't deny any of the accusations that you are going to level at me today, Amelia—may I call you Amelia?"

What I deny is the reasoning behind them. I did not wantonly abuse my son for the sake of abusing him. I did what I did for the good of the world. Were he not sculpted into Connor's powerful guardian, Harry would have followed one of two courses: not playing his part in the prophecy, or becoming a Dark Lord."

Harry had not actually known it would be so hard to hear her speaking those words. He curled into his chair, around his hand, watching as Lily glared with steady green eyes at Madam Bones, and raised a small barrier that stopped Snape's attempt to embrace him.

"What in your son's behavior convinced you that he could become a Dark Lord?" Madam Bones asked.

Oh, no, don't ask that, please don't ask that... everyone's going to know now...

"The fact that his magic was so powerful," Lily answered without hesitation. "That would be one part of it. If he could make things Vanish without even noticing it, then why shouldn't he make someone Vanish when they annoyed him? And, too, there was the sensation of his magic. I could only compare it to dog vomit. There were times it stank like rotting flesh, however. That was the major purpose of the phoenix web, to save and cleanse his magic, and, by extension, save Harry. He was made unnatural by Voldemort's attack. After it, his magic was stronger than it had been before. We had to restrain him, and we had to make him into someone who could serve and save the world, not just take from it."

At least she stopped short of telling them that I'm Voldemort's magical heir, Harry thought. He was panting, sweating, dizzy. Snape had struck a fist on the outside of the barrier, but Harry didn't look at him. His eyes were on his mother, and she was the only important thing in the world.

"Mrs. Potter, do you know what you are saying about your own son?" Madam Bones sounded disbelieving.

That's right, said the crab-rage in Harry's head, and pinched him with sharp pincers. She has no right to say those things about you. She

said them once before, and they were wrong then. They are wrong now.

“I know it perfectly well,” said Lily fiercely. “I lived in the same house with him for eleven years. I knew what he was.” Abruptly, her voice softened. “And I knew what he could become, what he might be with the phoenix web on his magic and the proper training. Someone wise and good, self-sacrificing, who could give up his life to save his brother and never think twice of it. Such selflessness is not innate to everyone. I knew there had to be good in Harry, or we could not have trained him the way we did.

“And I now know that he’ll save me if I ask, because I was the person who trained him in the ways of goodness, and he would never give up his mother, not really.” Her gaze turned in the direction of the balcony where he sat, and Harry knew she had seen him come in after all. “Harry? Will you stand and speak a word for your mother?”

“Don’t you dare,” said Snape, with a precision that he normally saved for describing mistakes in Potions.

Harry ignored him. His body no longer seemed entirely his to control. Images of the past were flashing near his eyes, and the conflicting impulses played round and round in his head. As he stood and went to the edge of the balcony railing, he imagined his mother proud, radiant, walking free of the courtroom without her chains. She would smile at him. She would call him a good boy. She had said that he could be good. She didn’t believe he was all evil.

Chasing the beautiful imaginings were the dark ones, the rage that said she didn’t deserve to live, that she had hurt him, that he had every right, according to the pureblood dances she had made him learn, to grasp and crush her life.

He did not know which impulse would overtake him when he looked over the balcony railing, but he knew he had to look.

He looked down, and met his mother’s eyes. He had no need for the window. Despite the distance between them, he knew he was

meeting them, and he knew every detail of the clear green so well that it was as if she had levitated up in front of him.

“This is irregular,” said Madam Bones, sounding as if her outrage had half-choked her. “Mrs. Potter, sit down. Mr. Potter, sit down. I am leading the questioning, and—“

Lily ignored her, lifting one of her arms in a sweet, sweeping gesture that her manacles abruptly brought to a halt. “Harry,” she said softly. “My dear boy. You know I’ve loved you. You know I’ve taught you everything that’s made it possible for you to survive and prosper for so long. I’ve paid in return, given up my magic to your vengeance and my freedom to this world that doesn’t understand. Don’t you want to see me free? You could do it, you know. You’re strong enough. You could break my chains, and you could reach into the Ministry and free your father, and then we could go together to the house in Godric’s Hollow and have the idyll we should have had. This time, son, I promise you I’ll show you my love in ways you can recognize. I didn’t know you were that desperate for a family, Harry, for a life somewhat more like what other people call normal, but this time I promise you’ll get it.”

The world spun faster and faster, becoming a maelstrom. Harry didn’t know which was stronger, the love or the hatred. He could imagine her chains shattering. He could imagine her throat crushed. He breathed, hard, and moment after moment passed without his making a decision. Madam Bones was calling for order, but her voice seemed faint and far away—and so did the sounds of another person forcing their way through the packed bodies towards him, at least until that person finally spoke.

“Harry.”

He turned his head. Draco was standing there, as close as the barrier Harry had raised would permit, even closer than Snape, his hands out and braced on the empty air holding him away from Harry. His eyes were gray, and somehow that color, even more present and clear than the green of his mother’s, grounded Harry, anchored him, made him listen as Draco spoke.

"I can feel your emotions," Draco whispered. "My empathy isn't that strong anymore, but it's strong enough for this. That's what you were afraid to tell me, wasn't it? What you wouldn't share in the Pensieve with me yesterday. My Harry. I'm so sorry. I might have guessed. You've always been afraid of every emotion in yourself but the ones she taught you to feel. But I can feel your hatred, like an icy wind blowing on my face, and I don't fear it, Harry. And I feel your anger, like heat across my skin, and I rejoice in it. She's not worth your destroying the courtroom or taking her life, not worth the guilt you would feel afterwards. You're worth much more than that, much more than what she's causing you to feel right now." He took a step back, but only enough so that he could hold out one hand. His eyes never wavered. "Come to me, Harry."

Harry felt the rage and the love and the hatred and the guilt yaw, and dip, and pitch, and turn. He wanted, still, to free his mother, and he wanted to slaughter her. Those two visions, warm smiling Lily and dead sprawled Lily, dueled for and claimed dominance of his sight.

Then he realized there was another impulse stronger than either of them, and that was the impulse to be just taken away somewhere, and held, so that he didn't have to think about this.

He let out a loud sob, and dropped the barrier. Draco didn't seem to move as he crossed the intervening space, looping his arms tightly around Harry's waist and holding him close.

Harry lowered his head, trying desperately to hide the tears. He didn't want to be a child, didn't want to be so young, he had faced harder trials than this and come through intact, he didn't want—

"It's all right," said Draco, and his voice still held no fear, only crooning triumph. "You can weep."

And the rage won, sort of. It turned the memories Harry had seen today sideways, so that he had to look at them and hate them instead of vibrating in sympathy with Lily's training. That made him decide to fight the sympathy, to touch people instead of hold them back, and he clasped his own arms around Draco's waist in return, squeezing so

tightly that Draco took in a little gasping breath, burying his head in Draco's shoulder.

Madam Bones called for a halt in the trial. Harry felt himself half-carried, half-supported by Draco and Snape out of the courtroom. He kept his face bowed, and wondered where they were going.

But during that time, the tears forced their way past his eyelids and down his cheeks. When Draco lowered him gently into a bed in Merlin-knew-what part of the Ministry, his face was already hard and hurtful with crying. Harry tried to roll over, putting one arm up around his eyes, but Draco was there with him in an instant, forcing the arm away.

"Not this time," he said, and held Harry close, but open, so that he had to bury his face in cloth and flesh if he was going to bury it anywhere.

Harry hesitated, and then his emotions forced him past the hesitation, and he began to cry once more. Part of him despised himself for needing this, but the need was too great to be halted. Training and memories gave way to what Harry supposed he could call instincts. He didn't think that Voldemort Apparating into the room could have pried him away from Draco in that instant.

He laid his head down and wept, in grief and rage and hatred and sheer relief that someone else knew what he was actually feeling. Snape waited until Harry's tears had finally stopped, and he'd worn himself out with crying. He had several potions to induce either sleep or calm in his pockets, but when Draco gently laid Harry down on the bed in this small antechamber for the witnesses, and then curled up with him, Snape saw they weren't necessary. Harry had simply fallen asleep from his weariness. His hand clutched Draco's robes, and his handless arm curved around him with ferocious determination. To give Draco his due, he was holding back with scarcely less determination.

"Will you be all right?" he asked Draco. "I must go back to the courtroom and begin my testimony soon. I am the first of the witnesses for the prosecution."

Draco arranged Harry so that his cheek lay on top of Harry's hair, and then closed his own eyes. "We'll be fine," he said, the fierce, possessive joy in his voice as good as a Calming Draught to Snape's ears after Harry's helpless sobs. "He's past the worst of it, I think. He's not to come into contact with that bitch again." That was said very casually, as if the insult were actually Lily Potter's name.

"He will not," said Snape softly, and wound up pulling out the potions after all and laying them on the table beside the bed. "Only use these if he needs them. The blue ones to relax him. The dark one is Dreamless Sleep, and the silver one will induce a lighter doze."

"I know that," said Draco, and rolled his eyes at him. "I am actually a good Potions student, sir."

Snape scowled at him, to keep in practice, and then left the antechamber for the courtroom again. The last thing he saw of the two boys was Draco apparently attempting to arrange Harry so that no part of Harry's body touched the bed.

Snape shut his concern up in an Occlumency pool. Harry was safely out of the courtroom, where he should have been in the first place, and beyond his mother's manipulations. That meant Snape didn't have to worry about him until such time as he came to and insisted on returning, or unless Lily managed to break free and find him.

Neither of those things will be happening.

With the concern shut up, his rage came back, a cold black boulder, and sat in him, and grew, until he was filled with frozen stone.

He had just reentered the courtroom when he heard a roar, and then several loud and frightened cries. He hastened to the balcony railing and peered over it, staring at the enormous lioness in the center of the floor. She was prowling towards the prisoner's chair, her fangs

bared. Lily Potter had shrunk back in the chair, having lost her defiant manner of a few minutes before, and shook.

Snape knew who it must be: one of the puellaris witches. Since Elfrida Bulstrode had not attended the trial, fearing, rightly, that she would transform when she saw Lily, this left Laura Gloryflower.

A few Aurors had hastened up, but their spells seemed to bounce from the lioness; Snape knew the puellaris witches had nearly the magic resistance of werewolves in this form. Of course, there was also the fact that the Aurors didn't seem to be trying. Perhaps they wanted the woman to be hurt.

Snape took a deep breath, cast *Sonorus* on himself, and leaned over the balcony. "Gloryflower!" he cried.

The lioness turned and looked up at him, with green eyes whose fire he felt from here. It was nothing compared to being looked at by Harry, but still he winced. Harry was power in its wildest form, pure and dangerous; he might do anything. The lioness was far more straightforward. She could do less, but a single swipe of her claws or teeth and a wizard was still dead. Harry had more mercy.

"Harry is safe now," Snape made himself say, little as he liked exposing his ward's state of mind to the court. Harry would be more devastated if he found Gloryflower had killed his mother than if he found more of his emotions had been exposed in public. "He will recover. His mother will not speak to him that way again, because she will never see him again. Please, calm down. Let the Wizengamot dispense justice."

The lioness's tail twitched, twice. Then she turned and stalked towards the prisoner's chair again, ignoring the more serious spells the Aurors fired at her.

Snape held his breath, but still hoped he might succeed. And he had, he saw. The lioness leaned near enough to Lily to take her head off and roared, a blast of breath that Snape could only surmise felt hot and meaty, from the expression on Lily's face. Her jaws snapped once, a reminder, and then she turned and stalked away.

Lily fainted.

The Aurors shut their gaping mouths and hurried to remove the prisoner from the chair. The lioness waited, making it clear that she intended to escort them back to the cells. Wisely, no one made an issue of it, and Madam Bones resumed the moment the Aurors, the prisoner, and their unusual honor guard were gone.

James Potter came in next.

Snape felt his hatred spread and increase throughout his being with the force of hammer blows. He had hated this man for a very long time now, since the day he had tried to get Snape killed by a werewolf and rescued him only at the last moment, but that was nothing next to what he felt for what James had done to his son. He could have stopped Lily. He could have opened his eyes and seen what she was doing. Harry might have suffered years less of abuse than he had. But James had not done those things, and Harry was someone who still thought his emotions were evil and had to be fought with and contained alone, someone who flinched from being touched and couldn't accept himself as human.

And James was not the cause of it, no, but he was one of the reasons it was not stopped.

"James Potter," said Madam Bones, when he was seated. Snape stared steadily at him all the while, hating. James just looked as arrogant as he always did. "You are accused of the neglect of your son, Harry Potter—"

"That's not true," James quickly responded. Snape clenched his fists to keep himself from going for his wand. His wandless magic coiled around him and whispered interesting things. He kept that still and away from choking James's life out with an effort.

"I assure you, it is true that you are charged with neglect." Madam Bones sounded cranky. Snape couldn't blame her. She had hardly been neutral in the first place, and then to have the constant

interruptions in the trial proceedings would have tried the patience of a Demiguise. And then to see Lily importuning Harry...

Snape calmed himself before something unfortunate could happen, and reminded himself his turn at testimony would come, and that James Potter would not really look better as six different sets of Potions ingredients, ready-harvested.

"That's not what I meant," said James. "I mean that it's not true I ever neglected Harry."

The arm of Snape's chair exploded. His magic circled him like a trailing serpent, the first time it had ever done so, and tried to slither under the balcony railing and into the main courtroom space. Snape restrained it with difficulty.

"We have memories and notes that say otherwise," said Madam Bones, but she had allowed a note of curiosity to creep into her voice. "Why do you think you never did, Mr. Potter?"

"Because I didn't know what was happening!" James threw his arms up in the air, but the chains tightened and stopped the gesture. "That's the truth. I never knew Lily had trained Harry the way she did."

"Ten years in the same house while the training happened, and you never knew?" Madam Bones questioned in disbelief. "Are you blind or stupid, Mr. Potter?"

Some of the audience members laughed at that, and Snape's magic tightened around his ankles in wicked amusement. He suspected that Lily had sealed her fate with her little plea to Harry, and tipped the sympathy of the audience, if not the Wizengamot, firmly to his ward's side. James would not find it easy to get out of this now, though Snape suspected he would avoid death.

"Neither," said James in annoyance, flushing. "And the lead questioner isn't supposed to insult the victims, Madam Bones. I read about that," he added defiantly.

Madam Bones leaned forward, and her voice got quieter. "You are a defendant, not a victim of child abuse, you stupid, stupid man," she said. "It was stupidity, and not blindness, then." She pretended to write that down, while more of the courtroom snickered. Snape was glad that Harry was gone now. He undoubtedly would have been horrified, and convinced that James wasn't getting a fair trial. He wasn't, of course, but very few trials in the Wizengamot courtroom were fair—neither of Snape's own had been—and this was far more fun. It was time that James paid in at least a little humiliation for the treatment he'd given Harry.

"I resent this," said James, trying to hold himself in and use that cultured voice Snape remembered from school, the one that got people to follow along and do whatever Perfect Potter wanted them to do. "I resent it greatly. You are making me a laughingstock, Madam Bones."

"No, you're doing that quite neatly on your own," said Madam Bones, inspiring another round of chuckles. "Now, Mr. Potter. You claim you noticed nothing during your son's childhood, which we'll define here as the time before he started Hogwarts. And afterwards? The notes we have state that you became aware of Harry's abuse during his second year at school. That would have been while he was twelve. And yet, you did nothing?"

"Lily told me the truth, then," said James. "That what she did was for the greater good of the world. She convinced me Harry was a sacrifice, and that visiting him or trying to change his situation would just increase our emotional ties to him, which wasn't good, since he was destined to die in the War."

Snape felt his amusement cool quickly and turn to disgust again. His magic whispered in his ear, mentioning that he could use chopped human liver for his Dragon-Calming Potion. Snape told it to go hang.

Madam Bones didn't sound impressed, either. "And what happened when your wife was stripped of her magic? Our records indicate that you left the house at Godric's Hollow then, and went to the Potter family home in Lux Aeterna. Why did you not divorce your wife and

strive to protect your sons, when you had put distance between yourself and Mrs. Potter?”

“I—” James sighed. “This is complicated,” he said, with another expression Snape remembered from Hogwarts, one that spoke of his readiness to spin a wild tale to try and protect himself from the consequences of his own actions. “You see, I still loved Lily. I love her even now. I had to learn to love Harry. And she hadn’t been abusing Connor, not really. So I just needed a little time to get used to the idea.”

“You had more than a year,” said Madam Bones. “And still, you made no significant progress in protecting your son.”

“He didn’t need it then,” said James crossly, flushing. “He didn’t see her most of the time.”

“But Albus Dumbledore played a part in his life, and he continued his abuse of your son,” said Madam Bones. “And you still made no attempt to charge him or your wife with child abuse, or even go to a private Healer from St. Mungo’s and insure that the damage to Harry’s mind was undone. All in all, you seemed content to pretend that it had never happened, until the night you were arrested for neglect, when Minister Scrimgeour reports verbal abuse of your son, as in your blaming him for your arrest. Why, Mr. Potter?”

“All of this is more complicated than you can possibly understand!” James retorted.

“Then explain it to us, Mr. Potter.” Snape could hear the steady tap of Madam Bones’s fingernails as she struck her lectern. “We are gathered here to hear your side of the story. As there are no witnesses for the defense, you may have all the time you like.”

James visibly swallowed once or twice. Snape felt some of his anger melt and turn into satisfaction. Do you feel the rope coiling around your neck, Potter? Not that they’d literally hang you, but you can’t run anymore, can’t find an excuse they’ll believe. How does it feel, to know that the world that once supported you and that bitch of a wife of yours as good parents now stands on Harry’s side?

"I was upset," James muttered at last. The acoustics of the chamber made sure he was heard. James looked as if he wished otherwise. "I did blame Harry. I shouldn't have. That wasn't verbal abuse, just a slip of the tongue."

"Then explain the rest, Mr. Potter," said Madam Bones at once. "Your not seeking help for Harry. Your not turning in his abusers. What of that?"

"They were my wife and my mentor, one of the greatest wizards who's ever lived," said James. "Would you have turned them in, Madam Bones?"

"Yes."

Her resolute word seemed to shrink James, who looked about as if for help. Snape didn't know if he'd actually seen him, or only surmised he must be in the courtroom, but James's eyes narrowed abruptly, and he looked up at Madam Bones with new confidence.

"Severus Snape brought these charges," he said. "The man hates me. He's animated against me by a schoolboy rivalry that he should have let drop a long time ago. Put him under Veritaserum. He'll tell you that's the truth."

Madam Bones shook her head slowly, mockingly. "Not so, Mr. Potter," she said. "Professor Snape filed the original charges, but we have received corroboration from a number of sources, too much evidence to dismiss. Now, I will ask you again. Why didn't you turn in your son's abusers?"

James shrank in on himself, and then a sullen expression settled on his face. He didn't answer.

"Mr. Potter?"

Still no answer.

Madam Bones clucked her tongue sharply. "Does the defendant wish to say anything else?" When James remained quiet, she nodded to the Aurors to remove him, and then looked up at Snape. "First victim for the prosecution's side of the case, please step forward."

Snape walked towards the stairs that would take him to the courtroom proper, just barely remembering to take the Sonorus charm off his voice so he wouldn't shout everywhere. His magic flowed with him, making him shiver. It did try to snap at James, but Snape kicked it back under control. He took the chair made for Harry, and at once it adjusted to his spine, molding itself comfortably around him. An improvement from the last time he'd been in this position, Snape had to admit as he looked up at Madam Bones.

"Professor Severus Snape," Madam Bones began. "You are Harry Potter's guardian?"

"I am," said Snape. Not that he always acknowledges it, but I am, and it would take more than a piece of paper in the Ministry to proclaim his guardian someone else.

"And you filed the charges of abuse and neglect?"

"I did." At the words "abuse and neglect," his magic strained and danced like a Crup at the end of its leash, trying to get away and go in the direction the Aurors had taken James. Snape restrained it. He was going to get out of the Ministry without being convicted of murder, or anything else. It was important that he control his behavior in all aspects of his life, which was one reason he was grateful that Minerva had worked as hard as she had to make sure the potential murder charges against him for Rovenan's death were dropped. He wanted to remain free, to insure that Harry believed him when he said that nothing mattered more than his health and safety.

"When did you first notice signs of abuse?"

"At the time, I did not know they were signs of abuse," said Snape quietly, thinking back to Harry's first year at Hogwarts. It struck him as odd now that he could have been so impatient with the boy then. Of course, he hadn't known that Harry's reluctance to do anything right,

to live up to the skills that Snape could see burning brightly in him, was induced by his parents. It had seemed right and natural that someone in Slytherin House would follow his ambitions, and to think that Harry would put love for his untalented, Gryffindor brother, James Potter come again, above his own self-interest had driven Snape quiet mad. "He botched simple Potions he was capable of making. He remained behind his brother in all his classes. He hid the extent to which he could perform wandless magic and complicated spells. When he won the Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Slytherin in his first year, defeating two Death Eaters at the same time, he arranged matters to make it look as if his brother had won. When I saw into his mind in second year, as I trained him in Occlumency, I realized what the problem was."

"And why did you not report it earlier?" Madam Bones sounded genuinely interested. Snape supposed she had been through the Pensieve Potion he'd turned in, and the memories collected from Lily and James during their rare cooperative periods with the Aurors, and had come to be convinced, had she doubted it at first, of the extent and malice behind Harry's abuse.

"Because the Headmaster told me to keep silent on account of the prophecy, and at that time, I still believed in him," said Snape. "I planned to treat Harry as a savior, train him to be a powerful wizard, and then reveal him as mightier than his brother at some point in the future. Then Harry himself begged me not to reveal the abuse. At the time, he seemed to have good reasons for it, and I listened to him. I did not know all the details of what his parents had done to him then."

Madam Bones nodded. "And when did you first change your mind about staying silent?"

Snape could remember the moment with acid-etched clarity. It was one of the defining points in his life so far, after all.

"When Harry's mind was shattered at the end of his second year," he said softly. "You have heard him say his mind was webs, yes?" When Madam Bones nodded, he continued, "He had a magical snake who had become entwined in his webs. The snake was killed. Harry's mind shattered. He had to rebuild himself piece by piece, and I

entered his mind to help him do it. While there, I chose to do what I could to heal him, in defiance of the Headmaster.”

Madam Bones frowned and flipped through her pages for a moment. “There are references to multiple changes of Mr. Potter’s mind here,” she said. “How many times would you say he has almost gone mad?”

“Three,” said Snape without hesitation. “Once at the end of his second year, once in the middle of his third when his mother attempted to renew the phoenix web on him, and a few months ago when the Dark Lord returned and cut off his hand.” He noticed Madam Bones shuddering convulsively, and hoped, with anger like the bite of a northern breeze, that the shiver would pass along the line. You owe him so much, all of you, for defeating the Dark Lord five times so far, six if we may count the time on the beach. Well may you feel sorry for what has happened to him.

“Would you say that Mr. Potter’s abuse has exacerbated the effects of the damage to his mind?” Madam Bones asked.

“Yes. Indeed, in two cases it was the direct cause of it,” said Snape. “The boy needs to be safely away from his abusers, and they need to be punished for what they have done to him.” He remembered the emptiness in Harry’s eyes when he was pleading with Snape not to hurt them, that first evening when Lily and Dumbledore had been arrested, but then he dismissed the memory. I am sorry, Harry. They do. Dumbledore will never stop trying to gain control of you. Your mother would never stop pleading with you to save her, or the world. You have been their sacrifice, their penitent little sufferer, long enough. It’s time for you to start living, and for them, with all luck, to stop.

Madam Bones nodded in satisfaction. “What would you say is the worst abuse Mr. Potter has suffered, in detail?”

Snape began to describe the abuse, based mostly on details that he had taken from Dumbledore’s memories, forcing his mind to be elsewhere, as it was when he used to report the consequences of Death Eater meetings to the Headmaster. He was thinking, instead,

of the way that Harry had put up a barrier to keep anyone from touching him when Lily spoke.

If the Wizengamot is so misguided as to free her, I will see her dead. I cannot kill her myself, or be suspected, because I will not go to Tullianum and I will not leave Harry. But I can and will make sure that someone else does it. A hint dropped in Mrs. Bulstrode's ear might not be out of place.

Harry stirred much sooner than Draco had expected him to, murmuring and rolling over about an hour after he had fallen asleep. Draco found himself disappointed. He had enjoyed the warmth, the trusting press of Harry's body to his, and, most of all, the feeling that Harry had nothing to hide, neither emotions nor thoughts.

Harry, of course, opened his eyes, and immediately moved away from him, his cheeks flushing. "What time is it?" he asked, even as he used his wandless magic to cast a Tempus charm. He stiffened at the numbers it revealed, sucking in his breath. "Do you think my father's testimony is over?" he asked, and started to turn towards the door.

Draco decided that letting Harry get away with this hiding was stupid, and therefore it wasn't going to happen.

"Harry," Draco said, and reached up, catching his chin and turning his face back.

Harry flushed again when they were face to face, and his eyes darted in another direction. Draco shook his head. Harry was definitely listening, look away though he might, and that was what mattered.

"You shouldn't go back there," Draco told him calmly. "Yes, your father's testimony is over, and Snape and my mother and your other allies will be testifying now. It'll do nothing but weigh on your mind. Stay here and talk to me. By the way your emotions burst out of you, you're tired of cooping them up." He shuddered a bit. The sudden assault of rage and hatred on his face where there had been nothing before had stunned him for long moments before he was able to get to Harry. Otherwise, he would have been at his side no more than a few seconds after Lily began her plea.

“I was just really tired,” said Harry, his words blurring. “Now we can—”

“This isn’t going to work, Harry,” said Draco, and heard his own voice tighten. Harry was not making him irritated so much as desperately worried and frustrated, but he did seem to be assuming that he could cry his eyes out, sleep in Draco’s arms for an hour, and then go on as if nothing had happened. That wasn’t the way it was going to be. Now that Draco had a better idea of what Harry was hiding, he wasn’t going to let him go back to hiding it. “You’ve got a secret that’s hurting you the same way denying yourself sleep did last year—”

“They’re not the same,” said Harry. “I know why I lost control then. This time, it’s just weakness.”

“Merlin, Harry,” said Draco softly, and pulled him down again, so that Harry was resting on his chest. “You’ve survived abuse, and you’re at the trial of your abusers. The last thing I would say that is is weakness. Normal emotions, yes, and I’m sorry you’ve struggled to hide them for so long. Why did you? Did you think we’d hate you for them?” He moved one hand strongly over Harry’s back, his longing for Harry to speak more intense than even his longing to touch him at the moment.

“I don’t want to feel them,” said Harry, and then yanked at Draco’s arms, though, Draco noted, he still didn’t use his magic to block touch, as he had earlier at the trial. “I want to spare my parents. I hate them, and I don’t want to hate them, and—oh, fuck.” He broke off awkwardly, and Draco realized he was probably on the verge of tears again.

“But you do,” said Draco softly. “And probably, Harry, if you really want to stop feeling those things, the only way through is to speak about them.”

“What is it with you and Snape and this mania for me talking?” Harry glared at him from beneath his fringe, but Draco knew at least half the rage in those brilliant green eyes was directed against himself. The

other half was aimed at Lily and James, or at least Draco hoped so. "I don't want to."

"Why?" Draco whispered.

"I don't want to tell you why, either. Besides, you know it." Harry made another, more determined effort to get away.

Draco wished Harry would take a Calming Draught, but knew he had no chance of getting him to agree to that right now, and that he'd lose Harry's trust forever if he force-fed him one. He rolled over instead, pinning Harry's lower body to the bed with his own. That brought up unfortunate ideas, but Draco found it easy to push them away. Harry's expression wasn't panicked, just miserable. He must know that being this close, or even just the sensation of arms around him and a hand stroking his back, was causing him to surrender.

"Harry," Draco said softly, "you can feel as much rage and hatred as you want. I won't despise you for it. Neither will Snape. Neither will anyone who knows the truth." His yearning to hear what Harry wanted to tell him grew sharp as a knife-blade. "Please. Tell us. I know you want to."

Harry tried to curl up on himself, not that he could do that when Draco was holding him the way he was. "I'll despise myself. I already do."

"Then what harm will telling someone do?" Draco kissed his hair, then the side of his cheek. "You know you can trust me, Harry. I want to know everything you are, everything you feel. Tell me." I want everything you are, he thought, but didn't say, in case those words might push Harry too far.

"I don't want these emotions," Harry said precisely. "If you convince me it's all right to have them, I'll just keep on feeling them. And I don't want to."

"Why not?" Draco took a slight stab in the dark. In truth, he thought he was correct, but Harry was the most complicated person he'd ever known. He could have some arcane subterranean reason for feeling

the way he did. "Do you think they're that inconsistent with being vates?"

Harry jerked like a landed fish and tried to roll away again. Draco rolled with him, ending up in a messy half-embrace, half-sprawled position.

"Just—don't," said Harry, and pushed at him. "I don't want to do this, Draco. I don't want to feel these things. I don't want to confess them." He spoke so fast Draco could barely understand him, keeping his face turned away. "I don't want to talk."

"They're normal, Harry," Draco breathed. Harry was on the verge of a breakdown, he could feel it. He felt bad for pushing him, but if he managed to thoroughly shatter Harry's barriers, then at the very least, Harry wouldn't go on pretending. "And you are normal, in this respect at least."

"I don't want to be normal," said Harry, and he sounded desperate. "It hurts."

Draco clasped his arms more firmly around him. "What do you want to do?"

"Go back to the courtroom."

Draco gave a little growl. "I meant, besides that."

"And that's what I want to do." Harry rolled back over and looked at him. He had, with what superhuman effort Draco didn't like to think, put his emotions away again. His face was calm and blank. "You can't restrain me, Draco, you know that, not if I really want to go."

And Draco did know that, though Harry might have been talking about the strength of his magic, and Draco simply meant in general. He wouldn't oppose something Harry truly wanted—not least because he thought the courtroom would give another push to Harry's barriers, and change him for good. He nodded and sat up, reaching for his wand to murmur a few quick cleaning charms on his hair, Harry's

hair—as much as that was possible—and the tear tracks on Harry's face.

Harry waited impatiently for them to pass, then made for the door. Draco caught up with him and supported him with his arm.

Harry gave him a sharp glance. "I'm fine."

"I like doing this," Draco said, and then of course Harry gave him a startled glance, as if he couldn't imagine that someone liked touching him for its own sake, but relented.

They walked back to the courtroom. Draco worked on burying his impatience. The more time he spent with Harry lately, the more he wanted. Not just time, of course, but everything. Touching him, hearing what he wanted to say, hearing what he didn't want to say, wanting to be wanted back—

It was that last that was most frustrating, Draco acknowledged. Harry loved him, he knew that, but his emotions were tangled and wound around each other like barbed wire, and now he was hiding from them. Draco mostly wanted them out so Harry would heal, but he was selfish enough to admit that he also wanted them out so that Harry would stop bloody hiding from everything else, and get a move on.

After the trial, Draco was going to hold Harry to his promise about sharing his mindset via the Pensieve.

They arrived in the courtroom just as his mother was finishing her testimony. Draco avoided both his father's and Snape's glare—though he flinched more at his father's than at Snape's—and settled Harry back from the balcony railing in an empty seat. Harry just conjured a damn window in his palm, of course, so it obviously didn't really matter where they sat.

"And the next witness for the prosecution," said Madam Bones, in a carrying voice, "is Connor Potter."

Only when Harry's head jerked up, his eyes flying wide, did Draco realize that Harry hadn't known his brother had worked out a deal

with the Minister that would allow him to testify against his parents instead of taking a victim's role. Connor had told him of it at several points during the last week, but Harry had never really seemed to hear, and now here was proof that he hadn't.

Here comes the next storm, Draco thought, and prepared to hang on.

Chapter Forty-Three: Greater Love Hath No Brother

Connor had known this wouldn't be easy. Who would be so simple-minded as to think this would be easy?

But he hadn't realized—because he hadn't realized how little impact his announcements must have made on his brother—that Harry would be staring at him with betrayal in his eyes as he stood up to testify.

He hesitated. Then he shook his head and went forward, working his way out between the press of bodies. Most of the people sitting with him hadn't realized who he was, and turned to stare at him in absorbed fascination as he made his way forward. Connor wrestled with the temptation to reach up and either brush his fringe over his scar or toss it aside.

A nice-looking witch in the same row he'd been sitting in gave him a smile and a nod that seemed to say *It's fine just the way it is, dear*. Connor smiled back at her, and walked the rest of the way around the galleries towards the steps into the main courtroom.

By that point, Harry had overcome his shock enough to protest. He was standing up, his hand extended to Connor across the intervening distance. Connor didn't turn his head aside from his brother, because no Gryffindor would do that. He just returned his gaze as calmly as he could, and kept walking.

"Connor, please," Harry whispered. His words echoed in the vast quiet that, for some reason, had decided to fall. Connor found himself irritated at the audience. They could talk now, since he hadn't reached the floor of the courtroom and Madam Bones hadn't begun the official questioning yet. Why did they have to choose now to act like they'd all eaten Fred and George's Silencing Sweets?

"Please don't do this."

He had known Harry would say that, or words like that. He'd imagined that he would be able to make some grand speech when the time came. Surely, even if no one else could get through to Harry and

make him see the necessity of this, he should be able to. He was Harry's twin brother, after all.

But he found his mouth so dry and his head so filled with what had to come next that no grand speeches helped him along. He just held Harry's eyes and said, "This has to be done."

Professor Snape, who sat closer to the staircase, was giving him what Connor thought was only the second approving look he'd ever got from him.

"Please take your place in the witness's chair, Mr. Potter." Connor couldn't make out the exact tone of Madam Bones's voice—she could have been irritated, amused, angry, or weary—but he decided that he'd made a spectacle of himself long enough. He sped up until he was on the floor, and then strode across to seat himself in the witness's chair. It adjusted itself to his neck at once. Connor was glad of that, even as he fervently wiped his palms off on his trousers. This was going to be hard enough without feeling as though he were taking his OWLS already.

"You are Harry's twin brother, Mr. Potter?" Madam Bones asked him.

I'm the same age as he is, and you're addressing me by the same last name. I'd think that was pretty bloody obvious. But Connor had given himself lecture after lecture not to do anything that would mess up the trial for Harry, so he contented himself with a terse nod.

"And you grew up in Godric's Hollow with him and with your parents?"

"Yes, Madam Bones," said Connor, thinking that two nods in a row was a bit much, when everyone was craning forward along the railings to watch him. They might start thinking he was afraid to speak. Connor didn't want to give them that impression, not at all. He wanted to give them the impression that his mother was a raving lunatic who needed to be prevented from hurting Harry anymore and his father was a spineless coward who shouldn't be let out of a cell for as long as he lived, just in case he did something out of spineless cowardice to make either of their lives miserable again.

“How aware were you of the abuse during Harry’s childhood?”

Connor grimaced. This was the part that wouldn’t look so great. On the other hand, he’d been a child, and not the most observant of children, either. It had taken him how long to notice that Harry was the better flyer, for example? And he still hadn’t taken him seriously as Quidditch competition after that, and paid the price. So of course he hadn’t noticed Harry’s training.

“Not aware at all,” he made himself say. “Lily concealed it so well from me that I just thought Harry was bookish, and shy, and in awe of me, by nature.”

“Did you never notice his various wounds from the pain curses he practiced?” Madam Bones asked, curious now. “Or that he had wandless magic?”

Connor let out a breath and wiped his hands again. “No,” he had to admit. “He hid the spells, and made sure to perform the most advanced magic when he was away from me, or I was gone. I remember asking Lily a few times why Harry didn’t play outdoors with me more often. She just reassured me that he liked to read, and that anyway, I didn’t have to worry about it, because there would be plenty of children who wanted to play outside with the Boy-Who-Lived when I went to Hogwarts.” He heard more than a few people snicker in the audience. He hoped one of them wasn’t Professor Snape. Not that he liked the git, Merlin no, but he was Harry’s guardian, and he knew how to teach dueling spells even if he didn’t have a clue about Potions. Connor wanted to get along with him because of that. He had the feeling that Professor Snape was going to be in Harry’s life for a long time.

“So your mother trained you as well?” Madam Bones sounded soft, and sorry for him now.

Connor scowled. They were not going to make this about him. That was what Lily and James had done for too long. “Not the same way she trained Harry. Never the same. She only had me practice a few charms that I could handle, that every wizarding boy handles. I saw more magic from James and his friends—“

“Friends?”

“Sirius Black and Remus Lupin.” Connor was a little nervous about naming Remus. He didn’t want anyone in the courtroom to remember that his godfather was a werewolf. But Madam Bones had her mind on other things, as it turned out.

“Do you think they were aware of the extent of Harry’s training?”

Connor shook his head. They weren’t going to touch Sirius and Remus, either. He’d argued with the Minister by letter for a long time before he managed to convince him to let him testify, and he’d become aware that the Minister didn’t like werewolves much. So this wouldn’t become about Remus, and Sirius was dead, and he’d died a hero no matter what anyone said, so it wouldn’t be about him. “They never knew. Lily was very careful to keep it hidden.”

Madam Bones’s face was troubled. “It just seems extraordinary that four people in the same house could have gone ignorant of such extensive and untrammelled abuse,” she murmured.

Connor shrugged, even as he felt himself flush. “I told you, I didn’t see everything. And Sirius and Remus weren’t there all the time. And James...” He trailed off for a moment, looking up towards the balcony where Harry sat. He knew what he wanted to say, but he wasn’t sure that he wanted his brother to hear it.

“And your father?” Madam Bones prompted him gently.

Connor took a deep breath and got the bit between his teeth. He remembered what Hermione had told him when he confessed his fears of being part of the trial. Oh, there’d been lots of cryptic babble about psychological states that Connor didn’t even try to follow, but Hermione made her best points in plain English, and he remembered those. It’s got to be done, Connor. Harry will never be healthy if his wounds aren’t healed, and this is the best way of doing that.

And there was what Ron had said, too. Think of it like this, mate. At least you’re helping them find a legal solution. What the

Wizengamot's going to do to 'em won't seem like anything beside what Snape will do. And the Malfoys? Ron had shuddered. Can you imagine them?

"James was an idiot," he said bluntly. "And sometimes he acted weird around Harry. I know that he saw things, sometimes, but he pretended he didn't see them. And a few times he told me to be careful around Harry, but he'd never tell me why. He was a coward. He was always a coward. I told him last year that I wouldn't let him hurt Harry, and I meant that. And then he did it when he verbally abused him after he was arrested." He turned and sought out his twin's eyes. "I'm sorry, Harry," he added. "I wanted to be there to punch his nose in after I heard about it."

Madam Bones made a small noise that Connor thought was probably a muffled chuckle. He didn't care. He'd needed to say that, and now that he'd said it, the questioning could continue.

It didn't continue, not quite yet. Before Madam Bones could say anything, Connor saw Harry's head appear over the side of the balcony railing. He waited. Harry was going to say something unfortunate.

That was all right. Connor had actually been more prepared for this than for the moment he went down the staircase to testify. It had taken him a lot of putting together of puzzle pieces—Hermione said he was a 'bricoleur,' which Connor thought meant a nicer way of saying 'slow'—to realize that that mantra the Slytherins repeated to themselves was true and, yes, Harry was an idiot sometimes.

"Connor," Harry said softly, "do you know all about Mum's history with Dumbledore?"

And that's unfortunate thing number one. I wish he would stop calling her Mum. "Yes, I do," said Connor. "You did mention something about that." And Harry had, in his conversations in the last week while he was walking about the school and muttering to himself. Connor had been part of the honor guard that trailed along on several occasions.

“Mr. Potter,” said Madam Bones, and then paused for an infinitely small second, as if trying to figure out whether they would know which one she was addressing. Then she continued with greater force. “Sit down.”

“Then you know that she wasn’t really responsible for her own actions,” Harry said earnestly. “I meant to bring that up, but I couldn’t stay in my own questioning that long, and Mum doesn’t think she did what she did only because of Dumbledore, so she wouldn’t say it in her own defense. But you can. You know that a lot of her actions were influenced by him.”

“Yes,” said Connor. He waited a heartbeat, just in case Harry would go back and sit down, or Draco or Professor Snape would make him sit down. Neither happened. Connor sighed, and finished the statement. “So?”

“So she doesn’t deserve to be blamed for this.” Harry’s hand curled around the railing. “You can make them see that. You can say that. You can still speak, and I can’t.”

“You’re doing a good job of interrupting the trial right now.” Madam Bones’s voice was an odd mixture of soft tone and loud volume, as though she were trying to figure out how to get Harry to stop interrupting the trial without yelling at him and perhaps making what he’d suffered worse. “Please, Mr. Potter, sit down again.”

Connor ignored the questioner. Harry had probably always been going to bring this up. He probably wouldn’t understand Connor’s answer, either. That was all right. The partial idiocy accounted for it.

“Dumbledore didn’t take away her ability to choose,” said Connor. “He never did that. No webs on her. The Wizengamot tested her for that, Harry, both right after she came in and after they found out about his spell that was influencing people. The Minister told me. So she was free-willed. She still had a choice. He didn’t coerce her to do what she did.”

“But it was like a web,” Harry said. “And she didn’t mean to do it to me for the sake of abuse, Connor. She was saving the world. You heard her. She could have made me a sacrifice, and then—“

Connor could feel himself start to scowl midway through that little speech. One of the things he’d learned in the weeks leading up to the trial was how hard it was for him, now, to listen to Harry put himself down. Everyone else around Harry seemed to understand it better than he did. Or maybe they’d just been taking care not to upset Harry as the trial came near. Whatever it was, Connor thought it was about time Harry knew the truth.

“You were actually under a web, Harry, and you broke free!” he said, loudly enough that he saw some of the people in the audience wince and lean back from the railings. “Don’t you dare make excuses for her when you had a lot more odds stacked against you and climbed over all of them!”

“Misters Potter—“ Madam Bones was saying, sounding upset, and then someone must have cast a Silencio on her. It was the only way Connor could have heard what Harry said next, his voice was so quiet.

“It’s all right, Connor,” Harry said. “Please. Please don’t condemn her to death. What do you want? I’ll give you anything you want.”

Connor closed his eyes as a wave of pity came over him. He did manage to say, “Please go back and sit down again, Harry.”

“And you won’t talk about her that way anymore?”

Connor knew that Harry’s eyes would be bright with hope if he looked. He knew that he would be relaxing, at the thought of the woman who’d abused him, whose womb they’d been unlucky enough to come out of, surviving, maybe even walking free.

“I didn’t say that I was making a bargain with you,” said Connor, quietly, and then forced himself to look up again. “I asked you to please go and sit down again. I’m going to talk about Lily, Harry, and try my best to make sure that she’s locked up in Tullianum.”

Harry shook his head. "I didn't know that you hated them this much," he said.

Connor had never been gladder that he wasn't Harry. He could just hate his parents. He'd tried not to, for a while, but he'd kept picking up pieces and putting them together, and after a while, he couldn't ignore the puzzle staring him in the face anymore. To forgive Lily and James was impossible, not when they'd just keep coming at Harry. And they'd said and said that they were right, they must be right, because they served the Light and they were Gryffindors. They'd said that over and over again during his childhood, even during the times when Connor asked what was wrong with Harry or why the other Hogwarts Houses let Slytherins stay in the school if they were evil or whether they were sure that he could defeat Voldemort.

And then it turned out that they couldn't live up to the ideals that Light wizards and Gryffindors should live up to. They'd lied about what they were. They were cowards, and they wanted Harry to save them, and they wanted to hide. Connor had known then that he hated them, and that he wanted to try as hard as he could to make them go away permanently, and he'd argued with the Minister until he wore him down.

At this point, not even pity for his brother would stop Connor, because he knew Harry's life would be so much better without them. He couldn't comfort his brother like Professor Snape could, or share secrets with him like Draco, or even fight beside him yet the way his allies could. But he could do this.

"Well, I do hate them," he said. Madam Bones tried to say something then, but apparently the unknown person renewed the Silencio the moment she started to speak. Connor was grateful for that. He wanted to talk, and he doubted that Madam Bones would have let him get away with saying this for long. Luckily, even the other members of the Wizengamot seemed too enchanted to interrupt. "They risked our lives when we were a year and a half old, Harry. They sent Peter to prison for their crimes, and told us he was evil all the time. They lied about Regulus. Lily trained you endlessly, and didn't even let me have a choice about whether I wanted you to

protect me or not. They gave us prejudices that made you hate what you were for your first two years at Hogwarts, and me hate you for the first three. James got better for a little while, but then when everything turned around, he blamed you instead of trying to do something about it. He acted like a prat when he was tried, too. And what was their justification for everything? A prophecy they couldn't even interpret right!"

Until he said that, Connor didn't realize he was going to say it. He heard the shocked gasps around him, and then some other member of the Wizengamot said, "Mr. Potter, is this true? Your brother told us that your parents and Headmaster Dumbledore based their actions on a prophecy they sincerely believed to be true. And now you are saying they did not know the truth of it?"

Connor made some quick calculations. He knew Harry had wanted to keep the true nature of the prophecy secret, but so had Lily, which wasn't a recommendation for him. And it wasn't as though Voldemort didn't already know the truth; he'd gone after Harry first the last three years, not Connor. Connor would keep the exact wording and the changeable nature of the prophecy quiet, but he didn't see any reason not to let Harry get the credit he always should have. Fair's fair.

"My brother is the true Boy-Who-Lived," he said quietly, and watched Harry's face ripple and change as if it were a reflection in a pool of water broken by a stone. "He was the one who blocked Voldemort's Killing Curse that Halloween night. He has a lightning bolt scar because of it. My parents left us exposed to Lord Voldemort on Dumbledore's orders, so they didn't know for certain whose scar came from rubble and whose scar came from Avada Kedavra. But I've seen—we've both seen—a Pensieve memory of that night, and heard the real story from Peter Pettigrew, who was there. It was Harry. And our parents just guessed, because they were afraid of Harry and they thought his magic was Dark, so they said that I was the Boy-Who-Lived and Harry was my guardian. They were trying to shape the prophecy to fit their own ends. They made Harry into what he is because they were afraid. They're cowards. They abused my brother, and I don't want them to go free."

He ran out of breath, and sagged back against his chair. Connor glanced from Wizengamot member's face to Wizengamot member's face, and wondered what his testimony would mean. They were perfectly blank now, good political faces, and he didn't have the expertise in reading expressions that Harry did.

Madam Bones had apparently finally managed to get herself free of the Silencio. She took a deep breath and said, "Mr. Potter, I'm sure you realize that this testimony is highly irregular."

"I don't care," Connor muttered under his breath, cross. He'd said a lot of what he wanted to say already. He waited to see what questions she would ask him now.

"But I would like to clarify some points of it," Madam Bones continued. "You are sure that your parents and Albus Dumbledore did not know which of you was the Boy-Who-Lived?"

"They made a guess," said Connor angrily. "But it was in the face of the evidence. They had reasons to suspect Harry, since his magic was stronger and waving around him after the attack. I'm not powerful. They just didn't want it to be him, so they manhandled fate and said I was the Boy-Who-Lived."

"And what are the reasons they didn't want it to be him?"

Did the spell cover her ears, too? Connor folded his arms and glared up at her. "Fear," he snapped. "Their stupid idea that Harry could turn into a Dark Lord. And more fear. They always thought he was Dark, you heard Lily say that. They thought he was foul." He thought of a trick to use. It was a trick that Harry would never use, but then, Harry was too self-sacrificing. He let his voice waver and drop, and a sound of tears creep into it. "Can you imagine what it was like, to grow up in a house with parents who thought like that? And my brother can't even see that it was wrong? Do you see what they've done to him?"

This time, he saw some of the expressions change to pity. He let out a deep breath. He didn't know if he'd won, but he thought he'd come pretty close.

“Connor.”

And there went Harry, again. Luckily, this time someone did tug him away from the railing and make him sit down, and Madam Bones resumed the questioning. From there, it was mostly clarification on points he'd already raised, but Madam Bones did dip her wand into the Pensieve and summon forth a few more memories.

Connor could see them for the first time. He watched as Lily told Harry that he must not expect to have time away from Connor, because his life was bound up in his brother's. He had to make sure Connor survived the War, first, and survived it innocent enough to kill Voldemort. Then his primary duty, if they both lived afterwards, was making Connor happy.

Connor shivered and scrunched up his arms. The thought of someone else living for him was really, really creepy.

I don't want someone else to live for me. And if Lily had asked me, I would have told her that.

He watched as Lily cast a spell that made Harry feel as if he were cradled, held in warm, safe, loving arms, and then paired it with one that made the touch turn cold and slimy. Harry tied it to himself with what sounded like a memory charm to Connor. Several memories like that made it clear that he'd been trained to consider any kind of touch, little by little, as something to be squirmed away from.

Connor felt his anger rising as he watched that. You didn't need to do that, even if you wanted him to protect me, he told Lily in his mind. You could just have taught him defensive magic and let him be. But no, you had to do this. You couldn't really have thought that someone would be hugging him in the middle of a battle. You just wanted to twist him more, because you hated him.

It made it worse that he recognized the day of the first memory, because of the old practice wand lying on a table next to Harry. It was their ninth birthday, and they'd both received new practice wands, so Connor had excitedly abandoned his old one to go outside and cast charms with James and Sirius. He still remembered laughing proudly

when he got a charm that made colored bubbles come out of the end of his wand to work right for the first time.

And Harry had been a few hundred feet away from him all the while, learning to hate being touched.

It made Connor want to punch Lily in the nose, too.

Then came a memory of them playing a Quidditch game, one where Harry came close to catching the Snitch. But Harry had kept it concealed from everyone that he was a better flyer than Connor, so Lily had thought he was trying deliberately to show his brother up. She'd apparently taken Harry off by himself afterward, while James ruffled Connor's hair and congratulated him on the win—a win that Connor could see now, in the Pensieve, had been given to him, with Harry pulling up at the last moment.

Lily knelt down in front of Harry, her eyes bright as Connor remembered the Hungarian Horntail's fire being in the Tournament last year. "Harry," she said softly.

Harry stood with his head bowed and a look of profound misery on his face, though he didn't have much of an expression normally. He looked up at his mother's voice, though.

"Harry, Harry, Harry." Lily shook her head back and forth, once for every time she spoke his name. Connor reminded himself that it really was just a Pensieve memory, so he couldn't step in, grab his younger self's broom, and concuss Lily with it. "What were you doing?"

"Playing with Connor," Harry whispered, his voice so small and tight that Connor wondered at it. If he'd heard his brother sound like that any time during their years together as children, he would have known something was wrong. But then, a lot of the time Harry didn't talk. He just smiled and listened.

And his eyes were always fixed on me.

Connor found that even more disturbing in retrospect, since at the time he'd never suspected anything there, either. He shivered, and then leaned forward as Lily spoke again.

"You weren't just playing," said Lily. "You almost won. And that would have broken your vow, Harry. Why did you almost break your vow?" She sounded disappointed, not scolding, and Connor saw Harry wince and bow his head again. He didn't cry, though. Connor tried to remember his brother crying before he came to Hogwarts and drew a blank.

"I didn't know—I didn't mean to—"

"But that was just it, Harry," said Lily softly. "You always have to know. You always have to mean to. That's why you aren't like anyone else. It's all right if some random Seeker in Gryffindor shows up Connor. But you can't. You have to make sure that you always pay attention to what you're doing. You might get your brother killed someday if you don't pay attention. And you don't want to do that, do you?" She paused for a long moment, then said, "Or maybe you do. I don't know, Harry. Perhaps you're jealous of Connor, and you want—"

"No, no, I promise," Harry whispered, not sobbing, which just made it worse. "I promise. I've put it all away, Mum. I might get jealous, or angry, but I'll put it away. I promise." He looked up at her, and smiled slightly. "It won't happen again."

Lily kissed him on his forehead, which made Harry look positively rapturous. "That's my sweet Harry."

The image faded. Connor realized his hands were shaking, and wondered for one mad moment if Fred and George would like to help him figure out a way into Tullianum before the sentencing happened, so that they could make his mother pay with some of the twins' crueller jokes. Madam Pomfrey still hadn't managed to discover how to re-Transfigure Marietta, and Connor knew they had some tricks that made that look like a Canary Cream.

"Mr. Potter."

Connor blinked, and looked up, and realized that Madam Bones was done with the questioning. "You don't have anything else to ask me?" he asked, wishing she did. His hatred had built back up. He could say some more things. They would be mean and hurtful, and Harry probably didn't want to hear them, but they would make him feel better.

Madam Bones made a small motion with her hand that could have been exhausted. "No. The next witness for the prosecution will be Peter Pettigrew."

Connor nodded, and then went to climb back up the staircase. His legs felt heavy. He didn't feel tired, though. He just felt, increasingly, that what he'd done wasn't enough. Damn the Minister for not allowing post into Tullianum, anyway. I'm sure that Fred and George could get something through to Lily if that weren't the case.

He reached the gallery level, and passed Peter on his way down. Peter gave him the first real smile he'd ever got from him, and squeezed his shoulder. Connor straightened his spine and lifted his head. You did good, that smile said.

He made for the doors. Madam Bones had given up on locking them, since most of the witnesses weren't assumed to need the same delicate care that Sapiertian had given Harry during his questioning, and it seemed the fate of this trial to be interrupted by people going in and out. Connor felt he was too angry to stay where he was.

"Connor. Connor, wait."

He turned around, not at all surprised to see Harry coming up behind him, but a bit apprehensive. He was angry, but he didn't want to vent that anger at his brother.

And Harry, judging from the look in his eye, was more than a bit vexed. At least Draco was with him, no more than a step from his right shoulder, and Snape was rising from his chair even as Peter began to speak his answers to Madam Bones's questions. They would keep Harry from plastering him to the wall with wandless magic the way that he had in third year.

Well, I bloody well hope so, at least, Connor thought uneasily.

“How could you do that?” Harry asked in a hissing whisper the moment he was close enough. Connor noted, with a distant amusement, that Harry was now trying not to disrupt the normal proceedings of the courtroom. Sometimes, Harry, you have a very misguided set of priorities. Well, no, not sometimes. It’s only the idiocy that’s sometimes. “How could you betray our parents like that?”

Connor narrowed his eyes. For Harry to accuse Connor of betraying him was one thing; Connor had been prepared for that, and at least it would have showed that Harry was being a little selfish for once. But Harry wasn’t allowed to get away with just ignoring what Connor had said about hating their parents and feeling no loyalty towards them at all.

“I don’t care about them,” he said. “They’re not my parents any more.” It burned on the tip of his tongue to say that Harry shouldn’t consider them his parents any more, either, but he’d seen what happened earlier in the year when he just reacted without thinking: Harry thinking so little of himself that he took an unknown curse and wound up lying pale and motionless in a hospital bed. Maybe that wouldn’t happen here, but Connor wasn’t about to risk it. Harry and hospital beds had a way of coming together. “I care about you. You’re my brother. I want to protect you for once. So I did.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t need protecting. Connor—“

And then he stopped and stared, because Connor had let a snort of laughter escape. He couldn’t help himself. Draco had come up behind Harry and wrapped his arms around Harry’s waist, watching Connor over his shoulder, so that he could see the carefully concealed amusement in the gray eyes. It was immediately replaced by worry, though, so Connor thought that Draco probably knew how fragile Harry was.

“I don’t.” Harry twisted fretfully in Draco’s hug, reminding Connor far too much of the way he’d twisted when he was under that spell that was supposed to make him feel comfortable and good, learning to

resist it. Draco didn't let go, and Harry gave up on resistance in favor of leaning forward and glaring, his hand making a sharp gesture. "And why did you tell them I was the Boy-Who-Lived?"

"Because it's true," said Connor. "Because maybe now you'll get even more protection, because people will think you're Voldemort's target, which is true. Because you deserve some credit for it, Harry."

"I don't—that's not—I don't want it."

Connor sighed. "I'm sorry." He had meant to say something about it, but not like that. "It's out there now, though, and I don't think anyone will forget it."

"Please," Harry whispered. "Please—"

"What is it, Harry?" Connor leaned nearer, never taking his eyes from Harry's, thinking irrelevantly that Lily and Harry looked completely different despite having eyes the exact same color. "If I can do it, I will."

"Will you go back, after the testimony today is over, and tell them you lied?" Harry whispered.

Connor sighed and stepped away. "I don't want to think about you asking me that, Harry," he said, and then moved off.

He heard Harry whisper behind him, "Please. I—I want you to. Please, Connor? Please? Anything you want, I promise—" And then a sharp cry as his emotions probably escaped his control again. This time, Connor hoped that Draco and Snape would get him away from the courtroom and make it so that he couldn't come back. A binding spell or a potion might not be out of place.

He just kept walking until he found a deserted patch of corridor to lean his face against, and sighed.

I didn't like doing that.

He forcibly brought visions of the twins' products to mind. There had to be some way of getting some of those past Tullianum security. Indigena Yaxley tucked her wand back inside her sleeve. She'd cast the spell to silence Madam Bones nonverbally, and with her real wand. The Ministry officials would search in bafflement, unable to find out who had done this, since, of course, no unregistered wands could get inside the building.

Indigena had wanted to hear the younger Potter's words in full. And what fascinating words they had been, she mused. Of course, her new Lord knew about the prophecy already, but she would report this to him anyway. It was interesting.

And she did fear that interest would be lacking in her life now, since the Dark Lord insisted on tugging her away from her greenhouses and her gardens and making her torture people. Indigena found torture boring. At least he was letting her use Evan Rosier as thorn food.

She settled back and prepared to wait out the rest of the trial, though she didn't think anything so interesting would come again. She had a mission, and one she was honor-bound to complete.

She had to smile again, thinking of the way Connor Potter had been reassured on catching sight of her as he fiddled with his fringe. Such a sweet boy, really, the kind to make a mother proud if he wasn't testifying against her. She hoped she wouldn't have to be the one to kill him.

Well, if I am, I'll give him to the devouring grass. Just a few moments of intense pain, and then he's done for. At least he'll get a quick death.

Chapter Forty-Four: The Wind of the Future

Harry felt it as he realized that his begging wasn't going to convince Connor, that their parents might die, and Connor wouldn't agree to the last desperate plan that Harry had thought of to save them.

For just a moment, temptation reared up in him, and turned, and looked him in the eye.

You could use your magic to interfere, after all, it whispered. An Obliviate, or even just a simple confusion spell that would cause them to believe what you told them about the evidence—

Harry shoved the temptation away from him, horrified that he'd listened to it for this long. Dimly, he heard himself crying out. He buried his face in his arm, unable to speak, barely able to think. It was easier just to feel the skin burning against his forehead, and the arms clutching at him, and to pant.

"Harry?" Draco whispered to him. "Harry, what was that?"

He shook his head, not thinking he could answer, either. Thought came back to him in drifting bits and pieces, like the broken flotsam of a shipwreck on the tide. He shuddered, and felt Draco tighten his hold again in concern. Obviously, the shudder hadn't done a great job of convincing him that nothing was wrong.

Harry didn't think he could stay here another moment. He hadn't listened to Peter's testimony so far, but he could hear it continuing behind him, relentless and calm, paving the road to execution. He would listen to it if he stayed here, and perhaps his desperation would grow until he reconsidered using magic to interfere with the process of the trial, as he'd said he wouldn't, as no one but a Dark Lord would do.

"I need to get out of here," he said, moving his mouth enough back from his arm that Draco could understand him. "Can you get me out of here, Draco?"

Draco was more than willing to comply. Harry kept his eyes lowered as they passed to the courtroom's upper doors. He knew that most of the gazes would be pitying, but at least some would be speculative. They would begin thinking of him as the Boy-Who-Lived, now, and wouldn't things change the moment some reporter wrote that up for the Evening Prophet?

Things had changed, and Harry felt, for the first time since the trial began, that he had a glimpse of just how great the changes would be. And as the protective dread for his parents faded and his rage reared up again, he knew that the changes wouldn't be just in the outside world.

Merlin.

Draco and Snape had been right. Harry didn't like admitting that even in his head, since what they'd wanted had seemed so mad, but it was true. Draco, ushering him into an anteroom that might or might not be the one they'd used before, and Snape, briskly unstoppering a vial, by the sounds of it, had both been right.

He needed to talk. He needed to think. He needed to shove this out, or he might end up taking the first step on the road that Dumbledore had followed. Dumbledore had had no qualms about using his magic to interfere with the process of the trial, after all, just as Voldemort didn't care about destroying and manipulating other wizards' lives to suit his own whims.

"Harry? Harry, will you drink this?"

Harry lifted his head, blinking. He wasn't entirely sure if he'd had his eyes shut, but it felt that way, so involved in his own thoughts had he been. He certainly hadn't realized that Snape had poured a Calming Draught into a conjured goblet and was holding it out to him, or that Draco hovered off to the side, eyes frenzied, somewhere between grabbing Snape's hand and forcing it away and opening Harry's mouth and forcing the potion down his throat.

But they were still leaving it open to him. His choice.

Yes. Everything has to be.

Harry once more slammed his emotions into a box, as he had just before he went back to the courtroom with Draco. That box hadn't held. This one had to. He padlocked it tightly. He would have to think about and resolve the questions he'd thrown into it, but for the moment, he just wasn't in a place where he could accomplish that.

The word "place" hit his mind like an arrow, pinning him to one particular idea before he could stray from it.

I need a place. I require it. I'll use the Room of Requirement when we get back to Hogwarts.

He took a deep breath, feeling much better now that he'd already made one decision, and said, "Yes. Thank you." He reached out and accepted the goblet from Snape, who had just started to pull his hand back. Both Draco and Snape stared at him in shock as he drank the potion, wrinkling his nose slightly at the taste. It was sweet enough, but had a faint, acidic aftermath.

He felt the serenity spread across his mind like another Occlumency pool, and took a great, whooping breath. What emotions he still had he felt detached from, as if he were hovering above them—except for the determination. Absentmindedly, Harry wondered if Calming Draughts didn't affect the will. It wasn't something he'd ever researched, being more interested in the properties of the Potions themselves. I can do this. I can still do this. And I'm going to do this.

"I didn't expect you to take it, Harry," Draco said, breaking the silence that had fallen between them.

"I know." Harry looked up. "I felt I had to. I don't want my magic exploding and destroying the Wizengamot." Snape's face hardened at that, but Harry refused to allow himself to think it was anger at him, because he knew it wouldn't be. He was shaping his own thoughts into an arrow now, aiming at his target, forcing himself to ignore distracting, irrelevant, nagging little insecurities. It wasn't very comfortable, but he wouldn't have to endure for it very long.

I can't go on as I have been. I need to go to the Room of Requirement and think, not just feel and react. And I don't want to do it alone, not this time. I'll take Draco with me.

"Can we go back to Hogwarts?" he asked. "I know that it wouldn't be good for me to hear the rest of the testimony." At the very least, he thought Hawthorn would testify—unless someone had found out she was a werewolf; the newest anti-werewolf restrictions said that known lycanthropes couldn't testify in court—and Lucius. Remus couldn't, of course, because too many people knew about his lycanthropy, including the Minister. Maybe Adalrico Bulstrode, if he was there; Harry hadn't seen him.

And he had to stop reciting the list of witnesses to himself, or he would go mad. He brought himself down with a sharp chop, and thought nothing more about it. Those thoughts went into another box.

"Don't you want to hear it, Harry?" Draco asked.

"Very much," Harry said softly. "Too much. I won't, not now." He hesitated one moment further, but if he didn't tell them, it was likely neither of them would understand why he wanted to go to the Room of Requirement. Besides, he wanted to tell them. He could admit that much, in the privacy of his own head. "I almost used magic on Connor when he refused me."

Draco closed his eyes. Snape drew in his breath sharply, and then said, "What kind of magic?"

"A spell I would have regretted using." Harry met his eyes and held them, grabbing other thoughts that wanted to rise, about other circumstances when Snape had looked that way—last Christmas, most prominently—and throwing them recklessly into another box. The sense of urgency, similar to what he had felt when he was getting ready to rush to the battle on the beach, built up in him. "I can't stay here. I have to get back to Hogwarts, and to the Room of Requirement. It'll give me a place where I can actually face these damn things."

Draco looked as if the morning had come. "Harry—"

He broke off, but Harry didn't know if he was choked up, or didn't trust himself to find the words, or if it was because of something else. Throwing more thoughts into boxes, he said, "Yes. I know. My parents may both die tomorrow, but I'll have to go on living. And I've got to do something to make sure I can." He'd lost track of how many boxes there were now, how many memories and feelings they were holding away from him so that he could function. That was all right. He had time to unpack them, once he was in a place where he wouldn't destroy anyone else when he did. "I must, I have to do this."

Snape said nothing, but reached into a pocket of his robes and brought out a small key carved of what looked like ash wood. Harry blinked and looked up at him. "Sir?"

"The Headmistress thought we might have to return to Hogwarts quickly," said Snape. "She has set up a Portkey location on the sixth floor that we may travel to for as long as the trial lasts." He hesitated a long moment, then said, "Harry. Will you want to do this in the company of both of us, or only Draco?"

Looking into his guardian's eyes, Harry wished he could say "both of you," but he couldn't. A large part of the anger he'd put into the boxes was still anger at Snape, at the way this had worked out. "With Draco, sir," he murmured, and Snape nodded and put the ash key into his hand.

"Speak the Portkey incantation while you hold it, and both of you will be taken to Hogwarts," he said, moving his gaze to include Draco. "I will stay here and watch the trial. I will tell you what they said later this evening, if you feel capable of hearing it, Harry."

Harry was wildly grateful that he didn't say something like, "If you've survived this bloody scheme with your mind intact." Snape was showing trust now, too, showing that he expected Harry to do the right thing, and that there was no question of his survival because he wouldn't endanger himself. He grasped the Portkey, and Draco stepped forward and held the other end.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said. "For everything. Portus!"

Draco recovered from the dizzying swirl of the Portkey method of travel faster than he usually did. Perhaps it was the odd emotion gripping him now, a mixture of battle-readiness and desperate joy. Perhaps it was that he'd been staring so intently at Harry's face that he'd had a focus in the usual formless dance of color.

Perhaps it was just the fact that Harry had finally, finally decided that he was going to speak about this. And unlike the time he'd run away to Godric's Hollow, he wasn't going to do this alone.

Harry waited for a moment, until he was sure Draco had his feet, and then opened the door of the small closet they'd landed in. Draco peered out behind him, searching for moving students. They must have arrived in the middle of classes, though. Draco would have murmured a quick Tempus charm just to make sure, but Harry was already striding out of the closet and down the corridor, making for the stairs that would take them to the seventh floor and the Room of Requirement.

Draco sped up until he was almost running. He was taller than Harry, and his legs longer, but none of that seemed to matter when Harry got into one of these moods of his. Draco had seen moods like this when Harry faced the dragons in the First Task of the Triwizard Tournament, and when he was getting ready for the battle on the beach, and when they were leaving to fly to Woodhouse. It was Harry's look when he was about to go conquer something.

But, Draco realized as they waited for one of the moving staircases to swing back around, it wasn't exactly like any of those. The determination to face the dragons last year and Voldemort on the autumn equinox had had Harry's usual protective fervor behind it; he knew that other people were in danger, and he wanted to do something to help them as soon as possible. At Woodhouse, he'd been almost giddy. This wasn't giddy. It was—

Damn it. Malfoys are not supposed to lose all their words at once.

Harry's magic was glimmering around him now, though Draco doubted that he knew it. When the staircase deposited them on the

seventh floor, Harry almost floated off the last step rather than simply walking. The light that traced him shone indigo, and then red, and then green, pacing through the shades as Harry paced until he found the tapestry of the ballet-dancing trolls. As he began to move up and down before the opposite wall, muttering something fiercely under his breath, Draco realized that the magic had outlined Harry in a mantle of keen, dark color, like a trailing cloak.

He stepped closer, fascinated and awed and longing to hear what Harry muttered.

"I need a place where I can think for myself and talk to Draco and work out what I need to do and won't harm anyone."

Draco blinked. He would have thought the demand shorter, since Harry's will ran so high. But he supposed Harry was trying to think consciously and painstakingly about this, so as not to miss out on anything he needed to do tonight.

If he does it. Harry had ignored so many invitations to talk about his emotions towards his parents in the last few weeks that Draco couldn't help but think this would be another failed attempt.

And then he remembered that Harry had taken the Calming Draught of his own free will, and walked away from the courtroom, and invited Draco to come with him, and his hope began to rise.

He waited with suspended breath until a rough stone door appeared in the wall Harry'd been pacing in front of. Then Harry stepped forward and opened it, and Draco followed him inside, into a large dark space.

Harry glanced around with eyes he could feel widening. He'd concentrated on his need rather than on what the room might look like when it formed itself, but still. He was sure he hadn't been thinking of something like this.

The room was a gaping cavern now, large enough that Harry knew it would extend out of Hogwarts entirely if its dimensions were normal. The walls were made of a dense dark crystal, slick and gleaming, but

smooth enough to present wavering reflections of himself and Draco. Harry's wonder increased as he watched strings of silver move under the crystal, the worms that fed on it and spun it. He knew this substance, now. Called ianthinum, it was less rock than living thing, a growing matrix that slowly increased as its worms did. And it absorbed whatever magic was thrown at it. It had supposedly existed around Merlin's time, but because no wizard had seen ianthinum since, Harry had had no clue if it was real or just an old legend.

Well, the Room can make it real, obviously.

Towards the far end, the ianthinum melted into darkness. Void or black fire? Harry couldn't tell from looking at it, but from the way it moved, it might be either. He tossed a bit of magic into it, to see what would happen. It just fell, like a Knut down a bottomless pit, and didn't come back. Harry smiled. Well, I can't hurt anyone with my magic this way, even if I get angry enough to blow up half of Hogwarts.

The crystal didn't cover the whole surface of the walls, he saw, when he turned and looked at them again, though the faint light—which came only from the worms in the ianthinum shedding their silver glow—had fooled him into thinking it did. He moved a step forward, and studied the small, framed portrait that hung, looking like a wizarding photograph, between one strip of deep blue and another.

He choked a bit when he recognized it. It was the memory that the Wizengamot had watched during Connor's testimony, as Lily taught him how to resist taking pleasure from anyone else's touch.

Harry flicked his eyes to the side, and saw other portraits waiting. He nodded. The Room had obviously decided that one thing he required was the inability to back away from any of his sacrifices.

He felt coiling terror rise from his belly in a spiral, heading for his heart, but he crushed it. He'd faced Lily's training once before, hadn't he, the day he asked for Draco to touch him? And he'd been equally courageous other times before.

Until he had that thought, he hadn't realized how deeply and thoroughly Connor's words about cowardice had shamed him.

Thank you, brother. You're one of the reasons I'm here. But this time, I'm not screaming in pain as Sylarana's death destroys me, and I'm not trying to rebuild my mind. This is making decisions that I should have made a long time ago, continuing the shift that's already begun. I'm not Voldemort, and I'm not Dumbledore. I can accept that I have limitations, and I need to change, and that there are things in the world greater than I am. I can't afford to do anything else. The strength of my magic and the fact that I want to be vates say that.

It was why he'd asked for a place to think, rather than feel. He'd had enough of reacting out of blind emotion. He was going to face the emotions, yes, but he was going to face them consciously. He'd felt ashamed of crying in Draco's arms as he had earlier that day, and that just made him tighten up and pull away again. So this time he was going to do it his way.

"Harry? What do you think this is?"

Harry turned around, and saw Draco standing next to an enormous pendulum in the center of the room. Harry blinked and strode over to it, wondering how he could have missed it before. It was silver, and apparently hanging from the ceiling, and had a huge, sickle-shaped blade. Draco held a hand a few inches from it, as if he wanted to touch it but thought that wasn't a good idea.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know, Draco."

Draco eyed it one more time, then took a step backward. "All right." He faced Harry. "So what did you want to talk to me about?"

The pendulum began to swing. Harry moved Draco out of its path, made sure the blade wasn't about to cut into his own back, and then met his boyfriend's eyes.

"The things I can't hide from anymore," said Harry. "The reasons I didn't want to use the Pensieve spell that you made, essentially."

Draco's mouth opened slightly, perhaps at the way Harry had phrased that. Then he asked, "Do you want me to summon a

Pensieve? The Room could give it to us, if we require it, and I know how to cast the spell again.”

Harry shook his head. “I will keep my promise about that spell after the trial’s over, but I know my own mindset. I’ve just hidden from it.” He started walking back and forth, parallel to the pendulum’s swing. Whoosh-thrum, the enormous blade sang as it sailed past him. “I want you to help me talk it out, and tell me when I’m being stupid.”

Draco looked as though someone had slapped him. Harry cocked his head at him. “Did you not want to?” he asked. “I admit, I didn’t ask that before, but I thought you would have objected if you didn’t want to come.”

Draco said something inaudible, then shook his head and murmured, “Not—not at all, Harry. I’m just amazed that you’re actually willing to do it now. Did nearly using your magic have that much of an effect on you?”

“Yes,” said Harry flatly. He could already feel the emotions knocking on the insides of the boxes, demanding to be let out. He was no longer good at building and holding these kinds of solid containers, not since Snape had trained him so well in the fluid pools of Occlumency. “I saw that I could turn into what I hate. And I don’t want to. I will not.”

“All right,” Draco breathed.

Harry took a deep breath, dissolved the first box, said, “You might want to stand out of the way,” and then turned and threw a burst of anger and magic at the ianthinum wall.

The magic manifested as a whirling black vortex, tugging in air and light as it moved about the room; Harry even saw the pendulum sway towards it, as if it wanted to vanish into it. And then the vortex touched the crystal, and turned into a waterfall of purple and blue. The ianthinum expanded a bit, and then settled back, pulsing gently.

Harry smiled. At least I know that it works to absorb magic. He squeezed his hand, and his magic sprang up and trailed him in faithful, obedient waves as he began talking again.

“I want so badly for them not to die, Draco. I told myself I was content with that. If I couldn’t save them from Tullianum—well, at least they’d be alive. I wanted the same thing for them as I did for anyone else. As long as they’re still alive, then I could visit them sometimes, perhaps—“

“No, you couldn’t have,” said Draco. “I would have sat on you if you tried.”

Harry nodded at him. “Yet another sign that I wasn’t thinking right, right there. And then I realized that I didn’t want the same thing for them as for anyone else. I wanted more. And I didn’t care that they’d abused me, that was what I told myself, I was somehow above all that—“

He dropped to his knees as two of the boxes shattered at once, and rage flooded him like a dark, hot whirlwind. Harry felt everything around him burning. He turned his head, to make sure Draco was all right, and found Draco standing safely on the other side of the pendulum, beyond which none of the flames could apparently pass.

A cool wind came blowing out of the darkness at the far end of the Room. Harry felt it take his flames and swallow them. In a moment, they were gone, but that didn’t remove the emotions, which circled in him like sharks hungry for blood.

Harry closed his eyes, and gritted his teeth, and drove his palm into the floor as he spoke the words he had to speak. “I do care. Quite obviously. There is part of me that hates them and wants them to die. Also quite obviously. And I need to stop thinking that I’m somehow above that, because if I was, I wouldn’t be feeling this.”

“And there’s no need for you to be a saint,” Draco snapped at him. “Quite obviously. For fuck’s sake, Harry, did you think that you couldn’t be angry?”

“Yes,” said Harry, and then convulsed as another box broke. This let out a bunch of shame that tumbled merrily around in his chest, and he knew that he’d have to deal with that next. “That was exactly what I thought,” he whispered, and took a deep breath, and then he was crying.

Draco slid around the pendulum and came up to put his arms around him. Harry leaned his head on him, and did his best to talk through the sobs. The words didn’t sound that great individually, but, assembled, worked out as:

“I needed this, you know. I wanted to talk to someone so much about my parents before the trial, especially after I’d punished Mrs. Bulstrode and didn’t have that weighing on my mind anymore. I didn’t think there was anyone I could talk to. I was so convinced that you would hate me if you found out about my anger, my hatred, my desire to string them up by their guts until they were dead.”

“I wouldn’t have,” Draco whispered in his ear. “It’s not the kind of thing you’d go to McGonagall about, sure, but I don’t care, Harry, I don’t mind.” His hand was making large circles on Harry’s back now. “I would have helped you string your parents up by the guts.”

Harry found he could still smile, which was at least more than he’d been able to do during his crying jag earlier. “I know. But I still love them, too.”

A startled pause, and then Draco pulled away and glared at him. “And now I know that you’re a bloody idiot.”

Harry glowered in the sharp spark of defiance looking at him. He wanted Draco not to agree with him. He needed to be reminded that there were people in the world who didn’t think like him, who weren’t him, who believed things that were in perfect opposition to his own beliefs and with perfect justification. When he knew that, he had a reason to go on arguing, and he had the necessary caution to keep his magic from making too much of an impact on the world. He couldn’t just do whatever he liked, because there were other people here, too.

Neither Voldemort nor Dumbledore ever really remembered that.

"I am not," he answered. "I love them, Draco. I wish they could have been real parents to me. I told Regulus that when he asked me on Saturday, the day we went to Cobley-by-the-Sea. The only family I've ever wanted to belong to is my own."

Draco flinched as if the vortex had struck him. Then he stood up and moved several steps back. "Harry," he whispered. "Does—I mean, my father hooked you into the wards on Malfoy Manor. Mother and Father gave you an alliance bracelet for your birthday. Does that mean nothing to you? Would you really prefer your mother and father over mine?"

Harry wanted to bite his own tongue, he wanted to take it all back, he wanted to say that of course he hadn't meant it that way and of course he would issue an apology at once—

But this was fear, the kind of fear Connor had talked about, the kind that had made his parents send Peter to Azkaban for crimes he hadn't committed. He had to remember that other people existed, but he couldn't let fear of what they might say prevent him from facing his emotions.

And he had to remember, he had to, that Draco trusted him, loved him, was in love with him. That love was strong enough to survive a disagreement, even a savage one. Harry was walking in strange territory, grasping things he didn't instinctively feel or know, had heard only as proverbs, for guidelines. But if he was ever going to make them part of his own life, then he had to do this.

"I would have preferred my mother and father the way I thought they were for the first eleven years of my life," he said quietly. "My father was the perfect Gryffindor, brave and strong and so like Connor. And my mother was someone I shared a secret trust with. We were going to save the world together. If they were real? Yes, I'd prefer them. Your parents are wonderful, Draco, and they've done so much for me, but I don't belong with them the way you do."

Draco folded his arms and snarled at him, angry tears forming in the corners of his eyes. Harry tried to remember the last time he had seen him this enraged, and didn't think it had been ever.

Fear ate at him. He Vanished it. Fear was the only emotion he was going to refuse to feel this afternoon, because it was fear that had kept him from feeling everything else.

"I'd like to know what other definition of belonging you'd use," said Draco, voice cracking down the middle. "They've welcomed you, treated you like a son, and like a son-in-law, known before you did that I loved you—"

"And all of that's wonderful," said Harry. "But, for example, I don't feel comfortable accepting the Black legacy because I think it should be yours. Or Andromeda's, maybe." He felt a surge of confusion. He let it ripple through him. He was granting permission to himself to do things like that, after all. "That kind of belonging, the kind that comes with blood. I don't feel that with your family. I'm sorry. Maybe I will someday, but I don't right now."

Draco turned away from him. Harry let him. He was still listening—Draco had never been good at the silent treatment—and Harry knew that he was hardly defeated. This was still words. It was still a contest where they could be equal.

"But now I know that my parents weren't the kind of people I thought they were," he whispered. Images of his mother flashed and rippled before his eyes. Whoosh-thrum, the pendulum sang. "I wanted them to be, and I desired them to be. I thought I could still make my mother into that kind of person when she appealed to me. She really did believe that she was saving the world. So, if that much of her was real, why wouldn't the rest of it be?"

"Because she abused you!" Draco screamed, swinging around again. "Does that fact not stay in your mind for longer than two minutes at a time, Harry? What is it going to take to make you think that you're the same as anyone else in rights, that you didn't deserve what she did to you?"

Harry held his eyes, and felt another box fly apart as if struck by a Blasting Curse. "This, I think," he said simply, and then turned and faced the wall. Draco had the good sense to duck behind the pendulum again.

Harry took a deep breath. This time, the air in his lungs seemed to turn to scales. Freezing rage ran along his arms, and manifested as coils, as tails, as hissing, lifted heads, as venomous fangs. Harry whirled, and serpents, magical and mundane, flew from him in every direction, sliding off his shoulders, vomiting themselves up from his throat, flying like sling-stones off his spine. They sped towards the ianthinum and the void at the end of the Room, but there were always more where they came from. Harry's emotions choked him and sped out of him, manifested and choked him again, appeared and then cleared from his throat, until he could finally scream.

"I hate her!"

The words themselves seemed to crack the air. Harry watched as a jagged lightning-bolt shape sped towards the wall, opening the Room up to—nothing behind it, but the crystal ate that, and grew a little closer. Harry could see the silver worms under the blue-purple rock brightening with contentment.

Draco made a small sound that turned Harry back towards him. "You hate who?" he asked.

"My mother," said Harry clearly, and pushed.

The fear he'd felt of saying that shredded and collapsed to the floor in limp rags. He remembered Lily telling him how she'd become a part of the sacrificial ethics Dumbledore preached, and heard, for the first time, as a response to it, not his own pity thinking that he should heal her mind and forgive her, but Connor's voice saying that Lily hadn't been under a web, but Harry had, and he'd still done better than she had.

"Lily Potter," Harry whispered. "I hate her. I hate that she made me into what I am. I hate that I can't just get rid of her. I hate that she'll always have marked me, no matter what I do."

His emotions altered, from the choking serpent-spit to wild contempt like the lash of lightning on a mountaintop.

“And I despise my father,” Harry continued viciously, not knowing he would say the words until he did. “Could he be any more of a coward? Edith Bulstrode is stronger than he is. Connor is stronger than he is. I thought he was going to change, but he couldn’t cling to and keep that change. And if I can’t keep my own change, my own promises, then I’m going to be no better than he is.”

“Harry, don’t say that,” Draco said, coming forward to the edge of the pendulum, and then hesitating again. “You’ll always be stronger than he is.”

Harry scowled at him. “Don’t interrupt.”

Draco shut his mouth.

“Not right now,” Harry added, and tried to keep his tone light, but he couldn’t manage it. He could feel himself prowling back and forth, his scorn rising and fluttering behind him like ragged wings. “Merlin. He lied last year, when he said that he’d always loved me, but he didn’t know what Lily was doing to me. He doesn’t love me. Of course, at this point, who can tell? He was saying something he thought would save his pride, I think, and keep him from being exposed to the shame and ridicule of being a child abuser. But maybe he meant it at the time. He couldn’t keep it up, though.” Harry heard his own voice descend to a hiss. “No matter. I cannot trust him. I am done with him.”

His thoughts swung again. This time, he knew what he was going to do, but he had to pause, to reflect, to reconsider whether it was a good idea. Then he shook his head wildly, impatiently. No, and no, and no again. I don’t want to deal with him again. He can have all the second chances in Tullianum that he wants. I don’t care if Connor visits him, or ignores him. I don’t want him to die, still not now, but I don’t want him as part of my life anymore.

He glanced to the side, and saw the pendulum at the top of its swing. He moved under it and held out his hand, hearing Draco’s shocked

gasp, ignoring it. By the time Draco grasped his shoulders and pulled him out of the blade's path, the edge had already cut his palm. So sharp was it that Harry didn't feel the pain until several moments after the cut had appeared.

Harry squeezed it to remove some of the blood, and four drops fell to the floor of the Room. Harry considered whether four would be enough, then decided that he would make it be enough. He was in a wild, fey, impatient mood, and he didn't want to wait any longer.

"I renounce what James Potter has given me," he said calmly. "From this moment, I renounce all claim to Lux Aeterna and the house at Godric's Hollow." One of the drops of blood froze into a pebble, and Harry nodded. "From this moment, I renounce all other Potter inheritances that might possibly pass to me as his son." The second drop burned. "From this moment, I renounce all claim to my middle name, which is his." The third drop turned into water. "From this moment, I renounce all claim to my last name, which is his."

The fourth drop became wind, and a deep, violent, bitter, sweet note of ferocious song. Harry tilted his head back and let it wash over him. The wind became indistinguishable from the swing of the pendulum in a moment. Harry stood there for a long moment, conscious of feeling lighter than he had just a short time before.

"Harry," Draco whispered. "You do realize that you just left yourself penniless, don't you?"

Harry opened his eyes and smiled at him. "And nameless, I know." He shook his head. "I'll survive, thanks to my magic—"

"And to me, you git," Draco cut in. "Not to mention all the other people who would be more than happy to help you."

Harry felt an instinctive revulsion rear up in him. But he looked at the revulsion, and it was revulsion Lily had taught him, to think that he didn't deserve gifts and a sense of belonging. He had told Draco the truth: he didn't fit in with the Malfoys or anyone else just yet. But perhaps he could, someday, and it would be stupid of him to reject that chance, just like the revulsion was stupid.

“Thank you,” he said, and made himself accept it.

He turned, and began walking back and forth again. He almost wanted to swear a vow that he wouldn’t use his magic to interfere with the trial, even if execution was declared for both his parents tomorrow, but the more he thought about it, the more he thought that was unwise. He had to make the decision on his own, or it was worthless. Yes, in some ways he’d have to lay himself under strictures—he grimaced to think of what he’d already decided he’d have to do after they were out of the Room—but he didn’t think this was one of them.

No. I’ll make the promise to myself, and not anyone else. That way, I’ll always have to be vigilant and clear-eyed, and watch myself. I know that I’ll still want to stop the Wizengamot if they decide on death tomorrow, but I have to see if I can actually hold myself back.

He must. He had to. He had to do this, and in some ways it was like surrendering to a law of the inevitable, reassuring and freeing, and in some ways it was like riding a thestral he couldn’t see, plunging into the darkness and trusting that there was something to catch him, from moment to moment.

He took a deep breath, and said, “I hate my mother so much. But I have to go tomorrow. I still know that I’d rejoice if they freed her, because of that part of me that loves her, even though I don’t want to come into contact with her again.” He glanced at Draco. “This time, if you think I’m doing something stupid that’s hurting me more, then you have my permission to force a Calming Draught down my throat, to try and get me to see reason.”

“But not to use a sleeping potion on you,” said Draco, slow realization creeping across his face. “Or remove you from the courtroom.”

Harry shook his head. “I have to watch this. I have to watch if she—if they kill them, Draco. I have to.”

Draco closed his eyes. “I don’t think it’s a good idea, Harry. I think you’ll break.”

"I know," said Harry softly. "And I don't think it's justice, that's why I'd break. But I can't stop the Wizengamot at this point short of compulsion. I won't use that. And I know—" Why was this part suddenly so hard to say? "I know that I can't be objective," he finished, miserably. "Maybe they do have some points, and I just can't see them. Maybe—oh, damnit."

And he was crying again, but Draco was there, holding him up again. Whoosh-thrum, the pendulum sang, and Harry clung to Draco and cried fiercely, out of anger as much as pain.

"Maybe they were right," he whispered, when he could speak again. "Maybe you were right. Maybe I was being abused, and denying that it was abuse."

He felt a great shudder run through Draco, the kind of motion a prisoner might make when getting up after being bound to a rack and stretching. Harry held on to him, and watched the walls part in his mind. If he was riding a thestral he couldn't see, it was carrying him high and far and fast now, and Harry couldn't tell for sure if the light ahead was sunrise or sunset.

I'll just have to take the chance, won't I? It's all new now. It's all changing. I thought everything was settled after I resculpted my mind, but it's never settled, it can't be settled. I'm going to have to change from moment to moment. I'm going to have to listen to Draco and Snape and all the others and evaluate what they say, not just trust that they're right or I am. I'm going to have to refrain from using my magic some of the time, and use it at others, sternly enough that my enemies will realize they shouldn't try to kill anyone on my side. I'm going to have to lead.

This time, he was the one who shuddered, and his magic spun around him like thrumming thestral wings, so chaotic that Harry couldn't tell what shape it formed from moment to moment. It bore him over a changing world. He closed his eyes and stood in the middle of rushing black wind.

But he was also firmly in the middle of Draco's arms, and that was what kept him grounded, spinning around a center instead of just flying loose and wild in the storm.

I've fallen once. I'll go on falling, and trust that he's there to catch me.

Harry hoped he would grow to trust others as much, in time—though he wasn't entirely sure Draco would want that—but it would have to begin here, with this one person. He trusted Draco with his life, his sanity, his weakness. Draco had taken the central place in his life that Connor had once held, but Harry couldn't just serve him the way he held Connor.

Merlin, I'm in love with him.

The realization almost made Harry lift his head and jerk away, but then he burrowed in once more and clung close. Draco grasped his hand and squeezed tightly. Harry chuckled.

"Don't damage that," he whispered. "I have to write a letter when we're out of here."

"A letter?" Draco pulled back enough to look at him.

Harry nodded. "A letter to—to the Seers. I can't go to the Sanctuary, not when there's a war on—"

"Yes, you can—" Draco began.

"No, I can't," Harry disagreed, vehemently enough to shut Draco up. "It's too isolated, and news takes too long to travel there. But maybe one of the Seers would agree to come here, and speak with me. I think I want them to now. Isn't that odd?" he added, meditatively.

"No," said Draco, who looked as though Christmas had come early.

Harry snorted. "Yes, you wouldn't think so."

He pulled back, and closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, and felt around in himself. He couldn't feel any more boxes, any more need to

explode with magic right now. He'd renounced his father, and committed himself to surviving the trial, and to at least considering that what other people said about his parents had more basis in reality than his own beliefs. He'd admitted he hated them. He'd had an argument with Draco, and fallen in love, and come to the realization that there wasn't just one course he could take and have it all be better. He thought that was enough for one hour.

"I think we're done here," he said.

Whoosh-thrum, the pendulum sang, and then it embedded itself in the floor, and stopped. The door opened.

Draco didn't believe it—he didn't dare let himself believe it, in some ways—until he came back into their bedroom from using the loo and saw Harry sitting with his Transfiguration textbook braced on his knee, under a piece of parchment, on which he steadily scribbled. Then he had to creep around to Harry's shoulder and read what the letter already said.

Dear Vera,

I know that you made the offer to me, once, to come to the Sanctuary. I still don't think I can do that, but will you, or another Seer, send me post, or come to Hogwarts to speak with me? I think I'm ready to speak to you about the state of my soul now. I'd prefer you, out of all of them, but as long as you're sure that the Seer sent is equally gifted and compassionate, then—

Draco had to put his hand on Harry's shoulder. Harry looked up at him, cocking his head.

"What?"

Draco said, "I love you, that's all," while around him he felt the wind of the future catch them up, and hurtle them forward.

Chapter Forty-Five: Spake As His Soul Bore Witness

Harry knew there were eyes on him. He would always be sensitive to that feeling, he thought, and the more because of his new change. Since he couldn't ease the staring with hiding and shrinking away, it would be harder to bear for a time.

He sat down at breakfast and ate his porridge. He knew people were murmuring rumors of the trial yesterday, and poking each other to go up and ask him questions about it. Harry ignored them. He knew the Daily Prophet had arrived, and from the way that people went quiet, the story on the front page must be about him. Harry ignored that. He kept his gaze on the porridge. The other Slytherins didn't bother him, though they gave him many puzzled glances, clearly unable to comprehend why he would be up this early when he didn't have to attend classes.

"Harry, you prat," Draco said from behind him, in a nasty tone. "You could have awakened me and told me that you were coming down to the Great Hall for breakfast." He dropped into the chair beside Harry's and glared at him, before helping himself moodily to a plate of sausages, as if to say that Harry could eat bland things, but he didn't have to.

Harry shrugged. "I couldn't sleep. I figured you would want to." He ate another spoonful of porridge.

Draco lowered his voice. "But you could have avoided all—this." He waved one hand to encompass the staring and the rustling and the whispering and the other signs of a bunch of people too interested in his business. "Didn't you want to do that?"

"I've got to get used to it sooner or later," said Harry quietly, and met Draco's eyes. "Since, after all, I don't plan to hide who I am any more."

The smile that spread across Draco's face at that was really quite frightening. Harry found himself eyeing it as cautiously as some of the Ravenclaws watched him. Draco leaned nearer and stared hard into

his eyes, then turned away and went back to his sausages, now helped along by a generous goblet of pumpkin juice.

Harry stared at the back of his head, then shrugged and started eating again. He supposed he would get used to that in time, too, at least if Draco planned to do it on a regular basis.

“Potter.”

Harry paused with his spoon halfway to his mouth. He knew that voice, but it wasn't one he'd expected to hear. He carefully set the spoon back in the bowl, and the bowl a good distance from his elbow, before turning around. Then he had to lean sideways, to stop Draco from going for his wand at once. Really, I'm not the only one who needs to make some changes. I know why he's overprotective of me right now, but he knows what I cursed her with.

“What do you want, Parsons?” he asked the Ravenclaw, who stood behind him, shielding herself with the Prophet as if paper would somehow protect her from powerful magic.

“I—I want to know if it's true,” she said, and fluttered the paper at him, too rapidly for Harry to make out the headline or the photograph on the front page. Luckily, Margaret elaborated a moment later. “I want to know if you really are the Boy-Who-Lived, the one who bounced back the Killing Curse.”

Harry rolled his eyes. Connor had come up to him yesterday evening and said he was sorry again, but wasn't that just like a Gryffindor, to blurt out something like that because he got angry? “Yes, I am,” he said, and tried to return to his porridge.

“But that changes everything,” Margaret told his back.

“Why?” Harry glanced over his shoulder, not trying to hide the dislike in his eyes. If she didn't know how he felt about her by now, she was truly mad. “Because you think the Boy-Who-Lived must be inherently of the Light?”

Margaret frowned. “Aren't you?”

“For Merlin’s sake,” said Harry. “You were the one who thought I was Dark, evil enough to curse, for getting your Headmaster in trouble. And now you’re ready to reverse everything that you believed about me, for the sake of one article? Come off it.” He took a bite of porridge, and then said out of the corner of his mouth, when he’d swallowed, “Draco, put your wand down.”

“Just one hex,” said Draco.

Harry shook his head. “She can’t use magic against you anyway, and it’s not fair, considering that other curse I put on her.”

“But I want to,” said Draco. He didn’t have a dreamy expression on his face, only a determined one. Harry knew he might choose a pain curse, though Margaret hadn’t done anything that awful to Harry himself; she’d hurt Argutus more. “And you want to,” Draco added, causing Harry to reflect that this conscious effort to drop his mask and show more of his emotions wasn’t always an unmitigated good.

“Put it down,” said Harry. He spoke to Margaret without turning his head again. “I didn’t defeat Voldemort because of any inherent Light I have. The decisions I’ve made between that night and now are what put me in Slytherin and made me into the person you said you despised. So, yes, it’s true, but you don’t have to let it change your mind. Think differently about me, think the same, I don’t care. Just let me eat my breakfast in peace, Parsons.”

Eat my breakfast in peace, and not think about having to be in the courtroom in an hour. They’ll do the sentencing today, I think. There wasn’t as much witness testimony to get through as I thought there would be, since no one testified for the defense.

Harry could feel his stomach dropping away from him as he thought about it. The Wizengamot had a good chance of sentencing at least his mother to death; whispers he’d heard yesterday and disregarded were rushing back to him now. The testimony’s many interruptions and irregularities had all been of the kind that flowed against her.

Harry wondered for a moment what he could have done to save her, then shook his head. He knew one answer to that; the magic slumbering around him in shimmering waves could have changed their minds, yes. And he had already said that he wouldn't walk that path, that it would make him too much like Dumbledore.

I didn't know that I would still want to save her so much, he reflected dismally, as he bit into a scone. I hated her so much last night that I forgot I also love her.

"Harry?" Draco whispered into his ear. "Are you well? You're shaking."

Harry shook his head. "Not going to vomit," he murmured. "Just thinking about what they'll do to my parents." He wondered distantly if he should have been more concerned over James, but he was fairly certain James would survive. The crimes he was accused of were less pernicious, and when he'd asked Connor yesterday what James's testimony had been like, his brother's report eased his worries further. The Wizengamot would laugh at James and give him imprisonment in Tullianum. Harry had already learned yesterday, in the Room, that he could live with that.

"Are you sure you should go today?" Draco brought him back from his racing thoughts, with a gentle touch on his arm and a fierce look in his eyes.

"Yes," Harry whispered. "I do owe them a witnessing, Draco."

"Why?"

"Because I would owe anyone a witnessing," said Harry. "Imagine having your magic stripped from you alone, Draco, knowing that everyone in the audience hated you."

"But you hate them, too," said Draco.

"And love them."

Draco clamped his lips together, his nostrils flaring, and Harry remembered his reaction to that declaration last night. He wondered if they were going to have a row during breakfast. But Draco just nodded, in the end, and ate several pieces of sausage to relieve his feelings.

“Potter?”

Harry tensed his muscles to keep himself from startling. He’d had no idea that Margaret was still there, since she hadn’t said anything. “Yes?” he asked mildly, refusing to face her.

“I hope your parents live.” This time, Harry heard her walk away.

“Bloody bitch,” Draco said, the insult the more vicious for being so soft, not less. “She probably means that she hopes they live to hurt you more. Bloody bitch. I hate her so much, Harry.”

“Aren’t you full of light and cheerfulness at the world this morning?” Harry asked, while his mind traced the outline of Margaret’s words again. “And I don’t think she meant that, or she would have said she hoped they went free. She may actually want them to live because she knows I would be upset if they died, Draco.”

Upset...does not quite cover it. The thought of their deaths set Harry’s world spinning dizzily on its axis. Harry covered it with short, thick bites of his scone, and a few swallows of pumpkin juice. The dizziness wasn’t the kind that would cause him to be sick. Harry hoped.

“She doesn’t,” Draco insisted. “She can’t mean you good.”

“I stand by what I said about light and cheerfulness.” Harry could feel himself creating a box again, to conceal his terror of what would happen. Carefully, he shut his eyes and stopped it. He made boxes clumsily now anyway, as he had seen yesterday. He didn’t want this one bursting open in the middle of the trial.

But I can use a mask to conceal what I’m feeling just enough to let myself appear calm. And if I see a chance to do my parents good,

then I'll take it. No magic, no compulsion at all, nothing that will hurt another person or me. But I don't know what the Wizengamot's decided, or how far along they might be towards sentencing. There may still be hope.

Harry wondered if he would feel this same painful sensation of standing on a precipice and not knowing whether a long drop or a gentle step lay below him before every major decision, before every battle.

If so, then that's what I'll have to feel. Harry shivered, and picked up his spoon again, while a cold wind seemed to speed along his skin. Maybe, if Vera or another Seer arrives soon, they can help me work through this. Realistically, though, Harry knew that his letter would take at least two weeks to reach the Sanctuary. He would have to cope on his own for some time.

I can do that. I meant what I decided. I'm not going back on any part of it. Harry hesitated as something else brushed against his mind. If I meant what I decided, then I should be able to take comfort from Draco. I don't think he would mind. Cautiously, he leaned towards Draco.

Draco was more than happy to wind an arm around his waist and attend to eating his breakfast with one hand. Harry sighed. The warmth of Draco's touch seemed to alleviate the dizziness, and let him eat more.

And I really do deserve this as much as anyone else? That was still a shy, fugitive thought, darting across his mind from one hiding place to another. I suppose I might. How strange.

Draco kept a close eye on Harry as they entered the Wizengamot's courtroom. Strong as Harry was, wonderful and marvelous as the changes he had made yesterday were, this was still the day that might see the death of his parents, or at least their imprisonment and the loss of magic from the one who still had it. Draco would have been more worried if Harry looked like an ice statue.

He didn't. Harry had bitten his lip raw already. His hand frequently closed into a fist, though Draco got him to open it by pretending that he needed to have his hair stroked. He lifted his head as if to peer over the heads of the people in front of them, though not even the full Wizengamot was there yet, and certainly not the prisoners.

"Draco. Harry."

Draco turned his head and met Snape's gaze. The professor had apparently stayed so late at the Ministry last night that he'd wound up sleeping there. His eyes were sharply alert, though, and he held himself like a coiling serpent. Draco could imagine that this day was as much a relief to him as it was a source of stress to Harry. At least the trial would end, and one of the two spells he'd launched into motion would have found its target. There remained Dumbledore's trial in March to deal with, but that was distant enough to allow Harry at least some peace.

And Snape some time to reconcile with him, which Draco knew was on his mind. No one outside Slytherin House would believe the way those dark eyes looked as they rested on Harry.

They narrowed, though, and Draco knew why. Snape would be examining Harry's eyes, his emotions, for traces of Occlumency pools, and not finding any. Harry had gone unshielded today.

Snape's eyes moved from Harry's face to his, and they bore a clear command. Draco nodded. "I'll be right back, Harry," he whispered, and then stood and followed his Head of House down the row of chairs and towards the doors of the courtrooms.

Snape leaned on the wall in the corridor outside and cast a Silencing Charm around them. "What has happened?" he demanded.

Draco smiled. He wondered if the professor had had any good news since the trial began. He doubted it. It felt better than he knew it should to be the bearer of that good news. "Harry faced himself in the Room of Requirement yesterday," he said simply. "He was able to say that he hated his parents, and he cried, and he made a commitment to facing the future with me." He paused to savor

Snape's stunned expression, before finishing with the two pieces of news he knew would mean the most. "And he rejected his last and middle names, and he willingly called upon a Seer."

"What."

Snape didn't say the word as if he were disbelieving, but more as if he dared not hope this was true. Draco nodded. "No one suggested it to him," he said. "I certainly didn't. But he bears only his first name now. He despises his father too much to receive that legacy. And he doesn't want to go to the Sanctuary, but he did write to Vera, the Seer he met last year when you were—away—and asked her to write to him or come to Hogwarts."

"What happened to him?" Snape whispered.

"He really, really doesn't want to be like Dumbledore," said Draco, with a shrug. He at least understood Harry's goal of not ever using his magic to compel or hurt another person, though he thought it unrealistic and wished that Harry would spend his magic on himself a bit more. "The temptation to become that way scared him so much he was able to drag himself through some of his fears."

"I wish I had been there."

Snape's voice was pure longing for that one moment, a yearning that Draco had only heard in other voices before when someone discussed originating a spell or being close to the source of mighty magic. He understood it perfectly, though. If Snape had been the one to go with Harry yesterday, he would be feeling that same envy himself.

"He'll reconcile with you," he said softly. "He'll forgive you for this."

Snape grimaced. "I am not so sure," he murmured. "Not after yesterday."

"Professor Snape," said Draco, wondering at the strangeness of his taking a comforter's role to this man even as he did so, "he can forgive—that woman. I think he can forgive you. And if it takes some

time to come, it'll just show that it's genuine, not the trained emotion that he feels for her."

Snape closed his eyes and said nothing for a long moment. Draco shook his head. You may not feel that you belong anywhere but with the family who bore you, Harry, but, Merlin, open your eyes. Snape would give everything he has to be your father. In a sense, he's already given up his invulnerability, his comfort, even his capacity for objective thought.

It was strange that he knew that without empathy, and it was strange that this was happening, and the strangeness thrummed in his blood. But Draco wasn't tempted to walk away from it. After the Room of Requirement, strangeness alone wasn't going to make him flinch.

Then Snape straightened with a snap, and all his masks came down again. "Thank you, Draco," he said coolly. "Did he say anything about what measures he is willing to let us take, if he becomes upset again?"

"A Calming Potion," said Draco. "Forced down his throat, if need be. But he gave that permission only to me." He couldn't quite help snapping the words. As Harry improved, other people might think they could approach him more freely, require things of him that he hadn't given so far. Draco was determined that some of those gifts would be his. His jealousy would be unfathomable to Harry, at least for a while. Draco didn't care. This was the way he was. "No sleeping potions, nor binding spells, nor removal from the room."

Snape gave a faint half-smile, and Draco wondered for a moment if he were seen as much as he saw. "Very well, then." The professor put a hand in his robe pocket, and Draco tensed out of instinct grown paranoid over Ravenclaws, but Snape merely handed over several blue vials. "This is all I carry at the moment."

Draco accepted them. "Thank you, sir," he said.

A movement, and a wave of people began to flow past them. Snape lifted his head, and his eyes grew more distant. "They finished the testimony yesterday," he said quietly. "There will be a summary of the

case, after they bring in the prisoners, and then the Wizengamot votes on their fate.”

“What do you think it will be, sir?” Draco asked. He knew what he thought, but Snape had seen far more of the testimony than he had.

Snape’s mouth pulled into a thin line, and his eyes glittered with some emotion that, for Draco, had no name. “For James Potter? Stripping of his magic, and imprisonment for life in Tullianum.” He shook his head. “For that woman? Execution.”

Harry watched the Wizengamot members settle into place. Amelia Bones still led them, he saw. She had taken her place behind the questioner’s desk, and watched the doors impatiently, as if longing for the moment when they could close them.

Harry glanced swiftly around. A great many people watched him, but none hovered on the edges of their chairs, the way he thought witnesses who had yet to bear their witness would. That meant—he thought it had to mean—that the testimony was done with. From the books he had read, he knew Madam Bones would speak for a few moments, reminding everyone of the major points from the case, before the vote started.

And it meant he had a chance.

Harry could feel his palm begin to sweat. That was all right. He controlled his face, and he doubted anyone had cast a spell that would let them smell his sweat, specifically, across this distance. And if they had? Could anyone really doubt that he was nervous, this morning?

He caught Connor’s eye as he arrived. His brother smiled at him, a nervous look, but his eyes glinted with determination. Harry knew Connor wouldn’t speak against whatever punishment the Wizengamot decided on—unless they released his parents, in which case he would probably be the first around the balcony railing to strike at Madam Bones. Harry had seen the expression on his face yesterday. It was Connor’s “I am just barely restraining myself from violence” look.

And he only wears that when he's really, genuinely angry. I'll have to apologize for asking him to lie.

Draco touched his shoulder and his hair, then slid into place beside him. "Professor Snape says that the Aurors will bring your parents in just a few moments," he murmured. "Are you ready?"

"I bloody well hope so." And Harry did. His plan was a light, fragile thing, made of leaves, really, and anything could destroy it. If he didn't get to put it into play, which was entirely possible, then its failure might destroy him. He had to be ready for either occurrence.

He could feel Draco's odd look boring into the side of his face. He ignored that, in favor of watching the lower courtroom doors as they opened and the Aurors marched Lily and James Potter in.

James walked with his head bowed and his gaze fixed on the floor. Harry thought that he didn't fully understand what he'd got himself into, even now, and what a decision against him by the Wizengamot could mean. He felt a stirring of pity inside him for the man. He paused, then allowed it. He had expressed his contempt yesterday afternoon. This was a new day, what could be the last day of at least one of his parents' lives. He would treat it with the seriousness it deserved. If pity was the closest he could get to compassion for James, he would take it.

Lily walked with her head up, and turning from side to side. Several times, her eyes went to the area of the galleries where he'd sat yesterday. Harry was a good distance back from that now, though, with Draco planted slightly in front of him, and straining as if he'd like to be completely in front. If Lily felt disappointed at not finding him, she didn't show it. She merely looked ahead, and wore a bored expression as the Aurors bound her to the second prisoner's chair beside James.

"The spectators will stop talking," said Madam Bones, with a *Sonorus* charm enhancing her voice. Harry was amazed at how quickly the chattering stopped. Then he realized that most of the room was

probably eager to see his parents sentenced, and clenched his hand into a fist.

Madam Bones remained silent for a moment herself, surveying the room regally, like an eagle from a mountaintop. Harry knew this was the best chance he would ever have. He stood.

“Madam Bones,” he said clearly, ignoring Draco’s hissed, “What are you doing?”

The questioner turned and looked at him, blinking a bit, as if he’d woken her from a dream of justice. “Mr. Potter—” she began.

“Not Potter, anymore.” Harry shook his head. “I renounced my surname yesterday afternoon, Madam. Harry will do.”

He heard chains rattle in the middle of the floor as James apparently jerked against his bonds. Harry didn’t care. His attention was for Madam Bones, and what she might or might not allow him to do. She was frowning slightly, as if he had handed her a Firewhiskey when she wanted butterbeer.

“Harry, then,” she said. “Surely you know that this is irregular. The time for witnesses to speak is past. I will summarize the case for the Wizengamot, and then will come the vote and the sentencing.”

“I know that, Madam,” said Harry, “but this whole trial has been irregular. I ask for your indulgence one more time.” Draco tugged at his sleeve. Harry ignored him, and remained on his feet. His hand did slip when he tried to put it on his robes, so slick with sweat was it. Harry didn’t let that show on his face.

As he’d hoped, the odd, formal way he spoke intrigued Madam Bones. She nodded to him.

“I would like to ask permission to speak one final defense of my parents,” Harry said, making sure to project his voice to all parts of the courtroom, raising it louder and adding a touch of magic to it when the buzz from the shocked and the appalled and the amused nearly overrode his words. “I give you my word that I shall use no

magic to influence the vote or the sentencing. I wish only to speak. I was not able to finish my own testimony yesterday, and then I was part of two witnesses' performances that I should not have been. I would like the opportunity to give my own speech, in full. If you and the Wizengamot will allow it, of course, Madam," Harry went on, turning back to Madam Bones.

Madam Bones seemed entirely at a loss for words. She opened her mouth, then shut it swiftly again, as if she didn't want to leave her jaw hanging open. And then she looked at the Wizengamot for guidance.

Harry's hopes climbed rapidly. His chances increased with every moment she didn't just refuse.

Draco tugged violently enough at him that Harry had to pay attention. "What are you doing?" he repeated. "Don't do this."

"I want to," said Harry gently. He wondered, afterwards, if it was the gentleness or the wording that made Draco stop, and sit up, and stare him full in the face, instead of just obliviously insisting that he was wrong and Draco right.

"Merlin and his demons, Harry," said Draco, which wasn't an oath that Harry had heard him use before. He breathed out in short huffs, and with each huff, one of his fingers let loose of the sleeve of Harry's robes. "All right."

Harry nodded, and looked back up at the front of the room. Madam Bones was speaking in heated whispers with someone who had leaned forward from his seat. Harry blinked when the man sat back again, and he realized it was Scrimgeour. Usually, he could sense the Minister's presence at once. He radiated power that had nothing to do with magic. This time, he had kept himself to the background.

In fact, why did he let Madam Bones take over at all? Yes, his moderating the trial might have been a conflict of interest, but everything else about this trial has been unfair and anything but disinterested.

Harry shook his head. Perhaps it was Scrimgeour's trust in him to do the right thing, a trust that seemed to have been restored now that he knew Harry wasn't the one who had used the compulsion spell.

"We will allow it," said Madam Bones, and Harry had more proof of that trust.

"Thank you, Madam." Harry inclined his head towards her, and towards the Wizengamot, and then made for the staircase that would take him down into the main courtroom. Draco probably did make a grab for his robes then; Harry didn't think he'd realized where he intended to stand. But Harry slipped past it, and made his way briskly forward.

He could feel his heartbeat, thin and chill, in his mouth. He felt the importance of the moment threaten to freeze him and make him unable to say anything.

But, no. I won't allow that. That would be the only disaster. This is a slim, fragile hope at best, and I might stammer and I might phrase things wrongly, and that would be all right. But not speaking at all, now that I have the chance, is indefensible.

He reached the bottom of the stairs, and found himself suddenly closer to both the man who had sired him and the woman who had borne him than he'd been for five months. Harry lifted his gaze and moved resolutely forward. He met their eyes, which was harder than deciding to speak for them in the first place.

James's eyes were haunted with warring emotions, dashing and colliding like stormclouds. Sometimes he looked worried, sometimes hopeful, sometimes upset, sometimes defeated. Harry wished the courageous emotions would win, but he doubted they could, at this point in James's life.

Lily's eyes held quiet satisfaction, and she nodded to him as he came to a stop next to James's chair. "That's it, Harry," she whispered. "I knew you would do this."

You didn't know a fucking thing, Harry thought, and held her eyes, and forced himself to remember yesterday, when she had encouraged him to break her chains. She wanted him to forget that she had tried to incite him against the court. She wanted to take credit for his decision to use only words today. Harry wouldn't let her.

His hatred howled at him. He pushed it gently away. He would no longer deny it, but it didn't have control of his life. Yesterday had been its day.

Today, he spoke out of love.

He turned and met Madam Bones's eyes. She shrugged. "You may as well go ahead, Mr.—Harry," she said, voice twisting oddly.

Harry nodded, and felt wind come rushing towards him and mantle him in cold wings. He was riding above the darkness on a thestral again, not knowing where he was going to land, not knowing how to stop, not knowing how to turn aside—

So you're alive, then? Good.

Harry pulled himself through the irony of the voice in his mind, which sounded a lot like Vera's, and reached for the words he needed.

"I was abused," he said quietly. "You know that now. You've heard the explanation of my mother's motives for doing so. I doubt you found them adequate." An explosion of snorts from the Wizengamot indicated that he'd been correct. "You've heard how my father didn't know of the abuse, and then ignored it and its consequences when he was made aware of it."

Harry heard tears gathering thickly in the back of his voice. He considered, then let them sound, but not pour down his face. He wouldn't try the equivalent of Connor's little trick in his testimony yesterday. He would, instead, show them what he was feeling, stripping off his mask and stepping into the world.

"I can feel hatred. I can allow that to myself. I can feel pain, and dread the road ahead, since it's going to take me so long to recover."

“Harry,” Lily hissed out of the corner of her mouth. “Harry, what are you doing?”

“But I can also feel love,” Harry continued. “There are moments in my parents’ lives when none of this happened. Their abuse of me does not define them, though I think it’s been allowed to do so, in this courtroom.” A few of the Wizengamot members actually shuffled their feet at that. Interesting. So they know they’re not objective, then, and they just didn’t care. “You’ve heard part of the explanation for my mother’s behavior, but not the whole of it. She made the decisions she did out of fear and a desire to belong. Albus Dumbledore told her when she was quite young, thirteen or fourteen, that she had a destiny, to carry the wizarding world into the future. My mother was a Muggleborn, and most of the students in school didn’t accept her or were afraid of what it would mean to relate to her, during the first years of Voldemort’s rise. She, and several other Muggleborn students, loved the idea of serving as sacrifices to rescue the wizarding world from itself, to keep it alive when Dumbledore convinced them no one else would. Think of it. Thirteen years old, and she could do what neither adults nor her pureblood classmates could. She was excited, of course.”

“Harry, stop this,” Lily whispered. “I knew what I was choosing. Do not try to blame Albus. He taught me ethics, not wound the rope around my brain that you are claiming. He did not abuse me.”

“None of that excuses her,” Harry said. “But it explains her.

“And my father... he was afraid. He told me the story himself of how he went slightly mad when hearing of how the Lestranges attacked and tortured Frank and Alice Longbottom. This was in the aftermath of the attack on us. He went after Bellatrix and Rodolphus and used Dark spells on them.” No need to mention that it was an Unforgivable. He’s not on trial for that. “He feared himself. He removed himself from Auror work the next day, and spent the next decade with us in Godric’s Hollow behind isolation wards, growing steadily more and more fearful of the outside world. He didn’t have the purpose that Lily and I did, to keep him going, and he didn’t have my brother’s innocent

conviction that he, too, was destined to save the world. He thought he'd played some part in the saving, and failed badly.

"None of that excuses him. But it explains him.

"The saddest thing about all of this is the wreck of our lives." Harry tilted his head towards his parents. So I think of them, one last time and no more. "So many people we could have been, so many things we could have done, so many other roads we might have walked, broken and stripped away." He had to close his eyes for a moment to hold back the tears, remembering what Vera had said to him when she saw his soul, about how Harry valued the endless unfolding of possibilities for other people, so long as they did not infringe on the freedom of others. They could have grown out of themselves, become so much more, in such profusion of beauty, than they did. Yes, I mourn that, and always will. For them, and for Sirius, and for Peter, and for Dumbledore, and for me, for all the people we might have been.

"I'm in a position to recover, somewhat. I was a victim of abuse, and, as my brother said yesterday, managed to step out of it and break the webs that held me. I have people who will continue to help me heal. But all Lily and James Potter have is a mentor who sacrificed them as he did so much else, friends who have turned their backs on them in justified disgust, a son who hates them for not letting him make his own choices, and me."

Harry turned to face Lily and James. He had to. The motion of his speech, the spiral it was taking, required it. James just stared at him as if he had never seen him before. Lily's eyes were filled with tears, and she was shaking her head back and forth.

"Harry," she said. "You cannot—you cannot be free. You can't have broken all the webs. You will be a Dark Lord if you do."

Harry looked directly into her eyes, and answered her, and answered the staring, silent Wizengamot up above.

"I plead for them because I cannot help but plead for them, because they are living souls in the world who have no one else, and I love

them. They have done harm, and they must be punished, and their healing is beyond my power. But I can ask that they be left alone, that the wreck of their lives not be ground into smaller pieces.”

Harry glanced up again at the Wizengamot, over his shoulder. “And I can plead for myself. It was for my sake the charges were filed, that the case was brought like this against both my parents and Albus Dumbledore.” Do you hear me, Snape? I understand, now, why you did it. Understanding is not forgiveness, but it may be a beginning of it. “A healing and a cleansing has begun in me with this trial. I can ask that it not be paired with sorrow as love and hatred are paired in my emotions with my parents. I ask for the Wizengamot to consider life in Tullianum for both of them. Abroad in the world, my parents can grind down other lives. Locked in one place, they can at least dwell with their own hearts, in their own silence, and rend and be rent no longer.”

The silence that had fallen was more still than death, and so Harry thought the entire court heard Lily’s reply to him. “Do you even know what you’re asking for, Harry? Why are you doing this, if you’re not going to ask for our freedom?”

Harry faced her again. The green eyes were the eyes of the woman who loved him, the woman who hated him, the woman who’d shared a secret and wonderful fate with him, the woman who had trained him in things that Harry now found so disgusting.

The woman who, more than any other, had made him what he was, but not what he might become.

“Because my own soul requires it,” Harry answered.

He turned back to the Wizengamot. “I have nothing else to say. Thank you.”

He climbed the staircase. His heartbeat sang in his ears, thin and high as the cry of a diving seabird. He fell limply into Draco’s arms when he reached the top of the steps, but then clung like a starfish when he realized just who was holding him.

“Harry,” Draco said into his ear, and no more.

Harry let himself be escorted back to his chair. He sat down, and leaned on Draco’s shoulder, and didn’t listen as Madam Bones summarized the case in a strained voice for the Wizengamot. He didn’t listen, either, as the vote went through condemning Lily and James as guilty, and thus worthy of sentencing, not freedom. That, they had had no chance to avoid, with the evidence of their crimes everywhere and no one denying they had actually happened. Besides, not a single person voted for innocence, vaguely surprising Harry. He supposed Dumbledore’s spell might have influenced the trial less than he originally thought.

And then came the sentencing.

“Speak your choice,” said Madam Bones. “For James Potter, imprisonment in Tullianum without magic, or death. Madam Marchbanks.”

“Tullianum,” said Madam Marchbanks, and Madam Bones nodded, and her gaze moved on.

Harry closed his eyes, but relaxed when he realized that there were twenty-eight votes for Tullianum. The Wizengamot had fifty-one members. Even if the rest of them voted for death, there was no way that James would not be spared.

And then came the moment when Madam Bones said, “Lily Potter. The choices are imprisonment in Tullianum—she has already been stripped of her magic, thanks to events that we all saw yesterday—or death. Madam Marchbanks.”

Harry looked into the face of the old witch, who was friends with the southern goblins, and had helped him free them and secure the London tunnels when he thought Voldemort’s attack might fall there. She looked fierce.

“Death,” she said.

Harry closed his eyes.

The next witch voted for life in Tullianum, and then the world altered and became unreal in Harry's consciousness. He couldn't feel his own breathing, but he could feel Draco's. He could hear the voices calling out their votes, but he shouldn't have been able to hear them at all, since his own heartbeat was so loud.

He counted. He had two lists, a ledger in his mind, and for each vote, a quill inked down a word on either side.

Ten for death, eight for Tullianum...

And then another for death, and two more for Tullianum, and what did that make?

"Tullianum," said another voice, and Harry panicked. He'd lost the count.

He could feel his breath speeding up, to the point of a panic attack. He felt Draco exclaim something softly, and then a vial was jostling at his lips, the sweet smell of a Calming Draught filling his nostrils. Harry gulped it, and then struggled against the serenity that spread over his thoughts. He had to think, damn it!

The doom went on spreading, voice by voice down the circle, and Harry did not know what was to happen, and he hung suspended over a knife's edge. Everything hurt—his eyes, as if he'd spent a month weeping; his throat, as though it were closing in on itself; his skin, as though it could hardly bear to have Draco's arms wrapped so tightly around him. The Calming Draught forced his muscles to relax against their will, and his mind not to speed so fast, but nothing could stop the Wizengamot members from speaking.

And then Madam Bones said, "Minister Scrimgeour."

Scrimgeour. Who hated his parents. Who hated abusers. Who had promised James that he would look over the charges again, and try to see if he couldn't get him charged with something more violent than neglect.

Harry found his eyes open without a notion of how he'd opened them. He was looking straight at Scrimgeour, who was looking straight back at him. Somehow, that did not surprise Harry.

Scrimgeour looked into his eyes for a moment that could not have been longer than a moment, because Madam Bones didn't get impatient and ask for his vote again. His eyes were yellow, one indication of Light pureblood heritage, and merciless and fathomless as an eagle's. Then he leaned nearer to Madam Bones, and he spoke. Harry saw his lips form the word as if in a dream.

"Tullianum," he said.

Madam Bones nodded, looking slightly dazed. "Lily Potter goes to Tullianum for life."

Harry felt himself sag back; the words had stolen all his own power to keep himself upright. He felt Draco's arms come around him, and pull him in tight, and he knew he was crying again. He had the urge to raise his hand and wipe at the tears. Merlin, he was so sick of crying.

But he couldn't, he truly couldn't this time. The moment was past, and he might have helped to save her life, and he was free, the last tie severed.

James tried not to fight when the Aurors stepped back into the courtroom. It would be all right, he told himself. There was still time for Harry—just Harry now, but the renunciation of a name didn't mean the renunciation of a family—to come leaping over the balcony railing and save him.

And then an Auror was undoing the shackles, and another pulling him to his feet, and James realized, realized, that he would not be saved this time, that there was no magical cure, no sudden reversal of fortune, to spare him the loss of his magic.

"No!" he screamed, and his magic rose, wandless, and lashed at the Aurors. They'd expected that, though, and one of them cast up a shield to defend his partner. That partner stepped up a moment later, James's brief fury done with, to clasp a collar around his neck with a

murmured incantation. James knew the collars and the spell, both, from his time in the Aurors. It would bind his magic to his body permanently. It was only used as a prelude to a criminal's being led off to lose his magic entirely.

Truth struck him and exploded his mind.

"No!" he screamed again, and he might have fallen to the floor, and he might have struck someone, or kicked someone, but he didn't know, he didn't think, he couldn't think, his mind swimming in uttermost despair, inevitability—

Until the moment the Aurors brought him into the room with the artifact that would strip him of his magic, and there was no escape. Lucius narrowed his eyes and gave a small shrug. It was not the outcome he had expected—nor, indeed, the outcome he had desired, since it now meant his spell on Lily Potter, the one that would insure she felt the few seconds of her death as a year of torture and pain, would not be allowed to come into play. But then, perhaps he should not have expected anything else, when they had a vates in the courtroom.

A vates who had just renounced his last name, apparently.

Would he like another one? Lucius thought, amused, but he knew better than to ask the question now. He rose and held out his arm to his wife, who accepted it with grace. Her red gown rustled around her.

"Pleasant not to have to declare blood-feud on anyone for a wrong verdict, isn't it, my dear?" he murmured, as he guided her towards the doors.

Narcissa tilted back so that her head rested on his shoulder, her eyes bright with half a dozen emotions Lucius did not often see there. But her answer was purely herself. "Of course it is. You know that the Wizengamot only made the decision that it did because of me, I hope, and their fear of being on the wrong end of my wand."

Lucius laughed aloud, a sound that caused most of the people in the nearby galleries to turn around and stare at him. He did not care. Those people were not married to his wife.

Indigena Yaxley rose slowly to her feet, her eyes narrowed and thoughtful.

Well. The Dark Lord wanted me to see this and report anything interesting to him. I shall have more than merely interesting things to report.

She worked her way down the stairs, pausing patiently when others forced themselves past her. She wasn't in a hurry to go anywhere. And the constant pauses allowed her to gaze her fill on—Harry? Lord Harry? She was not sure what to call him, even in her head.

He had spoken as his own soul required him to. Indigena did not doubt it for a moment. She had caught a glimpse of that soul through his words, and she knew what she would be facing.

She would never change her allegiance. Her nephew had done that, hiding from what the Dark Mark on his arm meant, and had required her to answer his debt of honor by adopting the allegiance herself. A true Yaxley did not waver, did not turn, never forsook honor and never forsook pride.

But she did regret that it could not have been different, that she could not walk up to—Harry now, and offer him a simple oath. He was a leader that she would be proud to have served, someone for whom she would willingly have left her greenhouses and her gardens.

I regret it, my lord. Indeed, I do. And I look forward to meeting you on the battlefield. That we may share the bond of honorable enemies is something to hope for.

It was a regret. She was still allowed those.

Lily was sure there was some mistake, when she was escorted from the holding cell they had given her down into one of a row of little rooms, all the same, all carved out of the rock. She had a bed, and a small loo, and a table where food would appear three times a day. There was nothing else, but there did not need to be. Harry could not

have meant what he said, or the world would already be shaking in fear of a second Voldemort. It was a feint, to fool the Wizengamot. He would be along any moment, to free her and run away into the darkness with her, to go back to Godric's Hollow and renew his training.

Lily did not see a reason to fear, when the enchanted lights in her room went off and Harry had not come. Of course he would come at night. The darkness should be literal, the better to hide them.

Lily did not lose hope, when she woke and Harry was not there yet. All the cells in Tullianum looked alike. He would need to search for her, past steel doors and carved gray walls, all the same.

Lily felt a faint tremor of disquiet, when she had sat on her bed in silence for hours—there was nothing to do in the cell—and still Harry did not appear. But, of course, he would need to wait until no one suspected he might move. The ones who claimed to love him, but had not molded him like she had, would be watching him too closely right now. He would come when he could.

Lily had to bite her lip to keep from crying, when the lights went out again and she was reminded that Harry's magic was powerful enough to have let him do anything he wanted about the people, the doors, the bars, the walls, holding him back from her.

Lily woke in the darkness that second night, and began to understand.

Chapter Forty-Six: Our Echoes Roll From Soul to Soul

Augustus Starrise was on his feet and moving the moment the sentence was announced, and the elder Potters taken away. He knew that Potter's—no, Harry's, he was Harry, now, and his brother Potter—friends would try to get him away as soon as possible. He had to speak to the boy before then, since visiting Hogwarts would be far too public for the kind of private alliance offer he wanted to make.

The staff he held abruptly brightened, the band of gold on the top, the one that held a bit of Alba's magic, shining as if struck by the sun. Augustus turned his head, sighting along the top of the staff. His heart beat in a mouth that seemed all bone, without a drop of moisture. Was one of Alba's murderers here? Had her magic recognized one of her killers? For that, he would abandon the alliance offer he was about to make Potter, since, if he could find the killers, nothing would matter after that, not once he called the *Caerimonia Inrevocabilis*, the sternest of the justices rituals.

But the gleam faded, and Augustus shook his head. He had never entirely understood the twining of his twin sister's magic with his own; her death so soon after the creation of the band of gold had ruined the enchantments that would have enabled him to summon her after death, speak with her, and learn whom he should take vengeance upon. The staff might have reacted to nothing more than the Dark Mark on the arm of someone in the room.

The Malfoy heir was helping Harry out of his seat when Augustus focused again. He took several small, smooth steps forward, calling on the pureblood dances that let him project an air of majesty out beyond his own features. People moved out of the way without knowing quite why they did so, and Augustus found himself standing comfortably in front of Harry, who glanced up at him and blinked.

"Mr. Starrise," said Harry, his voice devoid of emotion. Even with the tear tracks on his face, he still looked impressive, Augustus had to admit. Shutters had come down inside his eyes, hiding all the possible emotional wounds behind a mask of strength, and he was tensed, as if he prepared to run or leap. His magic sang around him,

a low-voiced sob of sweet music. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Augustus inclined his head. "I have never seen such a display of compassion and mercy," he said quietly, letting the truth come spilling out of his lips. It really was what he had felt when witnessing the boys' performance on behalf of his parents, imbeciles who had never loved him and had treated a child that any pureblood wizarding family would have been proud to bear poorly. "You are enough of the Light to make me honor you, Harry. May I become your ally?" He held out his hand, and waited patiently to see if the boy would accept it or not.

Harry stared searchingly into his eyes instead of accepting or rejecting the offer right away. Augustus nodded. This was a worthy person to follow, quite apart from his other allies possibly opening the way to Alba's killers. At his lowest, his most broken, he could still evaluate the political world that never stopped turning for personal causes, and ask intelligent questions.

"Why do you want to?" he asked. "It is true that I honor some ideals of the Light, Mr. Starrise, but you should know that I also practice Dark magic, and have Dark allies." The Malfoy heir's arm tightened around his waist, and he snorted, as though he could claim the highest place in the ranks of those allies. Augustus studied the boy, and was able to dismiss him in a moment. Someday, Draco Malfoy would be impressive, but that day was not yet come. "I thought you were too purely of the Light to ever want to fight beside me."

"I have changed my mind," said Augustus. "The year away from politics that the Minister forced on me gave me time to think, and You-Know-Who's rising this summer completed the change."

Harry inclined his head. "And you would be faithful, and not object to working beside Dark wizards, then?" he asked.

A fair question, Augustus had to admit. "I would not be willing to use Dark Arts myself, but other than that, yes, I would follow you faithfully," he said. "And you gain more than just the Starrises with my hand, Mr. Pot—Harry. Where the Starrises go, the Griffinsnest family will follow, and at the very least, the minor Light families, like Owlborn

and Morningsgift, will consider following. We have long been considered the most prominent of the northern Light wizarding families.”

He wondered why Harry’s face went still when he said the word “northern,” but it seemed no more foreboding than the still eyes. Harry nodded when a moment had passed. “Very well,” he said.

“Harry!” the Malfoy heir exclaimed. “You can’t seriously mean that! He would have testified against you at Fudge’s trial last year!”

“And he didn’t,” Harry pointed out, ignoring, with what Augustus thought was good tact, the fact that the ritual Scrimgeour had invoked against him hadn’t let him do anything vaguely political at the time. “And now he’s here, and he says he’s changed his mind. I should let him do that, Draco, at the least.”

The Malfoy heir grumbled low in his throat and gave Augustus a nasty look. Augustus smiled back at him. The threats of puffed-up little Dark wizards were not something he took very seriously.

He shook Harry’s hand, feeling content as that outpouring of magic surged around him. He had meant what he said. He knew something of grief, and the way that Harry had been able to ride and master his own had struck him like a lightning bolt.

He also knew, from that display, that there was no way Harry would ever join him in his vengeance against Alba’s murderers, or allow him to take it if he knew what Augustus was searching for. That was all right. Augustus fully intended to serve this young vates, who might be the only successful vates in history, to the best of his ability for as long as he could, and then part ways when he had to take his own justice without damaging Harry more than the loss of a murderous ally would.

Connor wrinkled his nose and rubbed a hand over his hair. He had thought he would feel complete satisfaction at seeing his parents sentenced, but a few minutes after they’d led James out of the courtroom, he had started feeling—weird.

Yes, weird was a good word for it. And so was “strange,” and so was “itchy.”

He scratched at his scar for a moment, and wondered if a minion of Voldemort was in the courtroom. But why would one of them come here? What could possibly be interesting about this? They could read all about the outcome of the trial in the papers. There had been loads of reporters present. Besides, Connor really, really doubted the Dark Lord who wanted to conquer Britain was interested in what one coward and one idiot had been doing to their children during their spare time.

Then he remembered that he’d told everyone that his brother was the real Boy-Who-Lived.

All right, maybe Voldemort would be interested.

But none of that explained why his hair itched, or the back of his head, or the inside of his elbow. Connor was getting tired of scratching all of them, and he was starting to think that someone would think he had fleas. He was already getting a few odd looks from people passing him by in their rush to get out of the galleries.

Then the people stopped passing him, and someone gasped. Connor didn’t know why until Harry said, “Connor?”

He looked up, and did his best to smile. It was difficult. Harry—hadn’t been familiar for a while. He hadn’t looked anything like as fragile as he’d been yesterday. He’d gone down into the courtroom and spoken for their parents the way a phoenix would sing. Connor felt awe, and a little of the wonder he used to feel around Dumbledore, and worry, too. He would have liked to know how Harry had managed that, and at what cost to himself.

“Harry,” he said, and then they both asked, at the same time, “Are you all right?”

Harry smiled. Connor was glad to see the expression. “I’m fine,” Harry said. Draco snorted his own impression of that at Harry’s shoulder, but Connor had learned to look at his brother when it came

to questions like this, and, incredibly, it did seem as though he might really be fine—his eyes were wide, but not dark, and he seemed drained, but not worn to a thread. “But what about you? I saw you scratching.”

“I itch,” Connor admitted. “I don’t know why. If I find out the twins put itching powder on me, I’ll—“ A small explosion of white light came off the back of his hair, and he cursed softly and tried to cover it with a hand.

Harry’s expression altered. “Oh, Connor,” he whispered. “Close your eyes for a minute, and then tell me what you see.”

How can I see anything with my eyes closed? But Connor obediently closed his eyes, and concentrated. He started when a vision of a corridor appeared, lined with portraits high enough above his head that he couldn’t quite make them out, and paneled with rich white wood.

“A hallway?” he asked as much as stated. “And portraits, and white wood.”

“I thought so,” Harry whispered. “I should have thought of it before. You just became heir to Lux Aeterna, Connor. They stripped James’s magic from him—“ Connor felt a fierce, brief stab of triumph that Harry wasn’t calling James their father anymore “—and I renounced the Potter name, so the linchpin is linked to you now. Probably other Potter properties, too.”

Connor nodded. He could feel more itches if he thought about them, just waiting to explode into visions when he looked. But, right now, he was more concerned with something else. Houses would be there when he went and looked for them. The chance to have a conversation with Harry wouldn’t always be.

“Just because you renounced the Potter name doesn’t mean you’re not my brother anymore, right?” he asked, opening his eyes and staring at Harry.

Harry's face softened at once. "Of course I'm still your brother, Connor," he said softly, reaching out and clasping his hand. "You're the only one of them I still want to be related to. Nothing will part us, I promise you, unless you have the bad taste to paint Lux Aeterna pink with green polka dots."

It actually took Connor a moment to understand that Harry was making a joke, though he would have got it in a moment from Ron. Harry didn't make jokes, especially not in the wake of a trial like this. But it seemed that he did, and he was smiling at Connor, encouraging him to laugh along. Connor heard himself chuckle almost unwillingly, and then he stared at Harry again.

Most of the time, he wasn't jealous of Harry anymore. Yes, he got to do great things, but those things were bloody dangerous, too, and he got hit with curses that made his guts spill out of him. That was not Connor's idea of a good time, though punishing the Ravenclaw who had hurt Harry still was, if only Professor Snape hadn't got to it first. And he knew now that training was necessary before he would be up to guarding Harry's back in battle.

And he wasn't really jealous of Harry's status as Boy-Who-Lived, either. Sure, Connor would miss some of the attention and the approval, but, ultimately, that name for himself had been based on a lie. The lie had been bothering him since he and Harry and Peter had all agreed to keep it a secret. Now it was out in the open, and everyone knew the truth, and the lie would stop itching in Connor's conscience.

But he did think he could envy the—he groped for a word, and couldn't find it, though Hermione would have known. Maybe it was capability? Yes, that would do, though it didn't have as many syllables as Hermione's words. He envied the capability Harry had to survive the battles and the dangerous things, and to make speeches like the one that had made Connor cry for Lily and James. He did wish he could have something like that.

But maybe he could. Not even Harry had been born with it, after all.

“Everything I inherited is yours,” he told Harry softly. “Or at least half yours. If you want it. You’re older.”

Harry shook his head, his face relaxed and calm. “I’m only older by fifteen minutes, and I don’t want it,” he said. “Or I wouldn’t have renounced the name, Connor. I know I have the connection with you no matter what, but the possessions are tied to the Potter name.” He shrugged. “I don’t need them.”

“Are you going to take another name?” Connor asked. He thought it was a good idea. He’d been getting a better idea, from talking with Ron and watching the way students in other Houses acted, how big a deal family was in the wizarding world. Since he’d been raised mostly as the Boy-Who-Lived and not as a Potter, it wasn’t instinctive, but he was working on it, and Harry without a family at his back would constantly have to face small annoyances, people trying to outmaneuver or trap him.

He’s got me. That thought made Connor ache with pride. But other people wouldn’t see it that way, now that a name no longer connected them.

Harry shook his head. “Not right away,” he said. “Not for a long time, in fact. I—” He hesitated, as though he wanted to find the right words, and then spoke carefully. “I never felt as though I belonged with anyone the way I belonged with James and Lily and you, or the way I should have belonged there. And until I can actually experience that sense of rightness somewhere else, I don’t want a surname, or parents.” He smiled, and Connor flinched. It was a smile that expressed all the sadness Harry had so far succeeded in keeping off his face. “Besides, I’ve had a lot of practice being a brother, so that’s all right, but not much practice being a son. I don’t think I’d be any good at it.”

“Merlin, Harry, you’d be perfect for plenty of people,” said Draco, apparently unable to keep his mouth shut any longer. Of course, for a Malfoy, silence is unnatural, Connor thought. “You don’t know how welcome my parents would make you. And you know what Regulus is offering, and I’m sure Mrs. Bulstrode—Millicent’s mother, I mean—would love to make you her son, and you know Professor Snape—”

“Don’t, Draco,” said Harry, all but snapping the words, and Draco hushed. Connor hid his smirk. At least I don’t have to worry about Draco walking all over him anymore. “I’m not ready to think about it, I said.” He turned back to Connor, his eyes steady and soft again. “What about you? Are you going to be all right now that Lily and James are in prison?”

Connor nodded. “I talked with the Weasleys when I was with them this summer. Mr. Weasley said I was perfectly welcome to stay with them as long as I liked, and they’d apply for legal guardianship when I wanted them to.” He didn’t quite want them to, not yet. Lily and James deserved prison, of course they did, and Connor didn’t need someone to come rushing up to him and hug him just because they were in Tullianum now. He wasn’t a little boy.

Harry seemed to disagree, since he leaned forward and hugged Connor in the next moment. Connor blinked and bowed his head to his brother’s shoulder, then hugged back. “I’m glad,” Harry whispered into Connor’s ear. “I know you would make as good a brother to Ron as you have been to me.”

Connor remembered the first three years they’d been at Hogwarts, and bit his lip. But he wound up nodding. It seemed that Harry had forgiven him for those years, if he’d ever held them against him in the first place. “Thanks, Harry.”

And then Draco was drawing Harry gently away, and Connor had to follow them or find Remus, since he had to get back to Hogwarts somehow, but he spent a moment gripping the balcony railing in his hands and staring at the floor of the courtroom.

It seems so strange that it might actually be over.

But the itching in his head said it was. Connor hesitated, then closed his eyes and gave in to the visions of Lux Aeterna again. He had to admit, he was curious about what was behind some of the doors locked with wards that James had never allowed them to open...

Rufus leaned back in his seat, now and then nodding to show that he was paying some attention to the pauses in Amelia's nervous chatter, and followed Harry with his eyes.

Remarkable, really, how much of the room turns around him.

Some of that, of course, came from the reporters and others who just wanted to see the trial as a spectacle. They would peer at Harry as if he were the main actor in a play. Rufus felt even more viciously satisfied with Harry's speech than he might have, on account of them. They had come expecting to see a tragedy, and Harry had brought a touch of the sacred into the room and made them confront it. A few hadn't been able to, and had taken to their heels, feigning boredom with yawns.

Their too-wide eyes gave them away, though. Rufus would be extremely surprised if many of their accounts of the end of the trial, either appearing in the papers or passed by word-of-mouth, were coherent.

Others turned around Harry as if they were planets and he the sun—or perhaps moons and the sun would be a better analogy, Rufus thought, since they were hoping to catch and shine with some of his reflected glory. “Power” traveled in hushed whispers throughout the courtroom, and there were a few too many people obviously not leaving until Harry did. Many people had heard of the young Lord-level wizard; few had ever been in the presence of his magic. Rufus was glad that he had been, before, and so had most of the members of the Wizengamot. That irresistible feeling of wanting to get closer to the source and soak up the magic, bask in it, had not influenced their decision in the sentencing of the Potter parents.

Well. Much.

There were Harry's allies, too, watching him openly, though some had already departed, as if secure that the boy was in good hands. There were more of them than Rufus had expected, and he saw another alliance made as Augustus actually went to Harry, and Harry,

after a few moments of discussion, accepted his hand. Rufus shook his head. I do not think that particular set will survive, but we will see.

The world always altered when another Lord or Lady appeared. So far, though, Rufus had mostly seen only interruptions in the dance. Now people were starting to find partners, and fall into new patterns.

And pick up speed. The next few weeks would be dangerous, Rufus knew. That was to be expected. News of Dumbledore's spell was spreading. There was Diggle to question. There were the revelations that had burst like dying stars in the trial, that Harry was the Boy-Who-Lived and had renounced his name. Their world was changing. Everyone who was wise and cared about his or her own position would be lifting up a head, pricking cautious ears.

Rufus could feel himself smiling, despite all the evidence that he still had changes to make in the Ministry he had thought was getting cleaner, despite the fact that half-controlled chaos in the wizarding world would make his own task harder, particularly now that Dark wizards, who'd withdrawn from the Ministry under Cornelius's paranoia, would be trying to influence his people through bribery and favors.

Good to be challenged. Let's me know I'm alive.

And it seemed that Harry was a Lord-level partner who might actually be trusted to keep his word and not muck about in the Ministry. No doubt they would clash, but Harry would not actually seek to win because of his magic.

Rufus had not thought he would live to see this day two years ago, had not thought such a day was possible. But it was, and here it was.

That was one reason he had voted for Lily Potter's life, he thought as he stood, and apparently stunned Harry to the core. Of course, he had accepted most of Harry's speech, and he had been an Auror who, while he hated abusers, also hated losing someone he'd arrested to death—it was too simple—and he had to admit a certain longing to see Lily Potter's face if and when she learned what her son really was, what he was really doing.

But he had also wanted to show Harry that he had that trust in him, that he believed in many of the same principles and could walk beside Harry on the path he trod.

Walk beside. Never follow. That is where, and how, we will clash, when it comes. He's a leader, but so am I.

But Rufus felt an eagerness for that challenge, now. It was no longer a storm to be feared, the wind that had begun blowing today, but a cleansing gale that might yet sweep most of the foulness left in their world away.

Snape shielded Harry from prying eyes and questions as he guided him and Draco out of the Ministry. Regulus, and Pettigrew, and even Lupin, shepherding the Potter boy, soon joined them.

The only Potter boy, now.

Snape allowed himself a moment to revel in that, and dismissed it. He couldn't actually enjoy Harry's renunciation of his family as much as he might have, say, a year ago, because he had felt too deep a longing the moment he heard of it—a longing to be able to fill that place in Harry's life himself.

He had known what he was giving up, what sacrifice he was making, when he revealed Harry's abuse. He told himself that for the thousandth time. He had known it would cost him the trust Harry had in him. But it had also led to this moment, this freedom, and apparently Harry's conscious choice to shut the lid on the past and continue with his life. Snape could not regret that.

But he had always been greedy, selfish, wanting more than he should want. He had seen that in himself when he brewed the potion out of Melissa Prince's book, the one that let him see his own soul. He could summon the vision if he closed his eyes, a dark flawed crystal—the ambitious impatience that had put him into Slytherin, and led him into the Death Eaters.

He wanted to be a part of Harry's life again. He wanted to see Harry take his surname, and call him by something other than a title, which Harry had never done. He wished he had at least the level of comfort with Harry that Lupin had.

It would not come without hard work; he knew that. When had anything he wanted in his life come without struggle that would kill half the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs in the world?

He wanted it now anyway.

He had been hovering behind Harry as he spoke to his brother, enough to hear Harry say that he wanted a rightness, a sense of belonging, before he took another surname. Snape was sure that he could give him that—more than sure. It would take time, but he could outwait the time, and do whatever was needed to show Harry that he would have a home if he wanted it, in the Slytherin dungeons or at Spinner's End, for the rest of his days.

But Snape did not believe that was the only reason Harry was currently refusing to take a surname. He was used to hearing a heavy tone in his ward's voice when he held something back, and he had heard it when Harry spoke to Potter about family.

What was it?

That question had to wait until they had arrived back at Hogwarts, and had an interview with the Headmistress in which Harry said very little, and then Lupin and Potter had cleared off. Regulus lingered, Pettigrew at his side, looking expressively at Harry. And Draco, of course, was there, too, but Snape did not mind that. Draco could hear every question he asked Harry, and would not breathe a word of it to anyone else.

Harry kept his head bowed, refusing to meet Regulus's eyes. Snape watched his old friend's face, and saw the moment when Regulus decided to throw caution to the winds and just ask. He sighed, but kept the sigh internal. Given what they both are like, this has to happen.

“So, Harry,” said Regulus, a little too casually, “now that there’s no longer two people who don’t deserve you hanging around in the background—“

“No,” said Harry, and jerked his head up, the motion violent. “I can’t. Not yet, maybe not ever. Don’t push me, Regulus,” he added, when Regulus opened his mouth. “I can’t do this. I—want to see you, talk to you again, this weekend, but I don’t want to talk about inheritance or family or bloodlines. Please.”

Regulus, like Snape, could apparently hear the wavering in Harry’s voice on that last word. Ordinarily, Harry would have already withdrawn to lick his wounds and grieve in private. That he had not was a vast step forward, Snape knew, but now he had reached the limit of his tolerance.

Now, Regulus nodded, and said softly, “Of course, Harry. I’ll be happy to come visit you on Saturday, Sunday, whenever you want to see me.” He abruptly dropped to one knee and hugged Harry hard, surprising a squeak out of him. “Whatever you need, Harry. I want to be there for you.”

Snape saw Harry freeze in shock, and narrowed his eyes. Yes, there is still something wrong, something unexpressed.

But the shock was gone in the next moment, and Harry returned the embrace. “Thank you,” he murmured. He glanced at Pettigrew. “And you, too, Peter.”

Pettigrew was wiser than Regulus, in some ways; he simply hugged Harry, nodded once, and turned away, wishing him a soft good-night. Then the two men left together. Snape guessed that they’d stay at Copley-by-the-Sea, always Regulus’s refuge when he’d suffered a severe disappointment.

That left the three of them, and Harry looked at both Draco and Snape as if he’d like nothing so much as to slip away. Snape could not allow it, not yet. He wanted to know what the thing gnawing at Harry was.

Harry turned his head away when Snape tried to meet his eyes. Snape realized with a little jolt that the boy was apparently afraid he'd use Legilimency on him.

This is not good. I must show him he can trust me. Does that mean that I should not ask him what is troubling him? Snape pondered that, but, in the end, felt he had to. I don't think Draco realizes there's more to this, not when he's caught up in his own hurt feelings about Harry rejecting the Malfoys as an immediate family. Draco had looked extremely disgruntled the whole time Harry spoke with his brother, but never more so than at the words about family. I want Harry healthy. I need to speak with him.

"Harry," he said quietly. Harry turned back towards him, but didn't raise his eyes. "Something more is behind your reluctance to take a surname than a sense of rightness or belonging, important as that is. What is it?"

Harry almost slumped against the wall. "I wish you didn't know me so well, sir," he whispered.

Snape tucked the pain those words gave him away in an Occlumency pool. Draco started and glanced between them, then reached out towards Harry. Harry leant towards him, trembling, and Snape realized that he was probably pushed over his limits already, and dropping fast.

Snape winced, but reminded himself that, if he didn't do this now, then Harry might tuck the pain away and simply refuse to be questioned on it again. "Will you tell Draco, if you will not tell me?" he asked quietly. "I will leave, if you wish me to."

Harry brought up his head with a gasp, as if he were drowning. He looked from one face to another, then said, in a mutter, "If I can't tell you, whom can I tell?" He waited one moment more, as though for an invisible signal, then nodded and began.

"What I said about family was true. And I know that I h-hate Lily and James now as well as love them, and I understand that other people love me. You two, for example, and Connor, and Regulus, and

Peter.” He took a deep breath, and Snape could almost feel him shoving through a barrier that prevented him from saying the next words. Knowing how thick Harry’s resistance to talking had been in the weeks leading up to the trial, he was silently impressed.

“I know why I love you,” said Harry quietly. “I’m inside my head, after all. I know my own emotions. And I know that you love me. I said that. I acknowledge it. But I don’t know why some of you love me, not completely. I don’t really understand why Regulus wants to make me the Black heir, instead of someone related to him by blood, or instead of his own child, if he ever gets married. I don’t understand why someone else would want to adopt me into a family—me, that is, and not any powerful Lord-level wizard, or the Boy-Who-Lived. I don’t understand the level of love that Draco claims the Bulstrodes have for me, or his own parents, or—“ He clenched his hand. “Or you, sir, on that level.” He nodded at Snape. “I trust that you care for me, because you’ve demonstrated it. But I don’t understand why you care for me as a father, if you do, and not just a guardian. I’m not good at being a son. I don’t think I can do this.” His voice sank, nerveless, and then dropped away entirely.

Draco made a small, fierce noise, but didn’t say anything. Snape found that he could not speak, either, but stared into Harry’s eyes. Harry had lifted his head and stared back at him with emotions he needed no Legilimency to read. They were terror and incomprehension, honest and open and complete.

“Harry,” he whispered, ready, at that moment, to try and explain the terms of his love, use words that would make him sound soppy, reveal his own secrets, anything that would calm the shaking boy in front of him.

Harry shook his head and closed his eyes. “I’ll understand someday,” he whispered. “I’ll work on understanding it. But not just yet. I—I wish I could take this weekend and just calm down, come down from the trial. But I don’t think I can. I have letters to write, and there’ll be a circus to deal with when the papers start reporting all the outcomes of the trial.”

Draco reached for him, but Harry slipped sideways. "I'm sorry," he said. "I've just taken all I can for right now." Gently, he reached out, caressed Draco's right cheek, and then turned and slid off down the hallway.

Snape thought about pursuing him, but was confident that Harry would do himself no harm. He was probably going to a place he could be alone, and recover in the best way he still knew how to heal himself. Silently, though, he promised himself that Harry would indeed have the weekend.

If there was only some way that I could insure that he takes it.

But then, as long as I'm wishing for the impossible...if only there was some way to show him how very much we all love him, and that he isn't a bad son. He simply never got the chance to try.

Harry stood on top of the Astronomy Tower, blinking as rain sluiced down over him. It had started raining shortly after they left the Ministry, but he hadn't thought the storm would chase them back to Scotland. Apparently, he'd been wrong.

He bowed his head and put his head in his arms, welcoming the touch of the cold water. At least it would explain his shivering if someone came up and saw him.

He was still feeling the aftereffects of the intense fear he'd experienced in front of Draco and Snape—the fear of revealing a vulnerability like that; the fear that they wouldn't understand him; the fear that, no, he didn't know how to be a son, how to relate to a parent, and that he never would.

He was trying. He believed them when they said someone else could adopt him. He was talking. He just didn't know why the chance for another family existed yet. It was like understanding that magic existed, but not having the slightest idea how to grasp and use it. He'd have to understand it from the inside before he could trust himself not to mess things up.

Apart from anything else, understanding why other people loved him would make him change his vision of himself even further than the Room of Requirement had. He could feel the first dawning of the revelation. It was as terrifying as it was exhilarating, and to deal with it in the presence of other people—particularly people who'd just realized how much he didn't understand—wasn't something he was up to yet.

Harry took a deep breath and wiped the hair back from his forehead. He was all right, he reassured himself. A good night's sleep would restore his balance wonderfully. Then he could continue with his course in the raging political world he'd finally realized didn't stop turning just because he had a bad few days. There were alliances to be made, as Augustus Starrise had proven to him, and other people affected by the trial to be cared for, as Connor had shown him. Harry wished he could collapse for the weekend, but he didn't see how it was possible.

Someone moved beside him. Harry turned his head, ready to tell the person to go away, if it was anyone other than one of the Slytherins, and to tell one of them that he'd come down to bed any minute now.

It was none of them. It was a woman he hadn't seen for more than a year, a calm, small, wren-like woman with brown hair and brown eyes. Harry stared at her, and felt her eyes see into his soul in return. Well, of course. She was a Seer. This time, though, he thought he could feel the operation of her gift.

Then he shook his head, and found his tongue. "I just—I thought letters wouldn't reach you for two weeks," he said weakly.

"For owls from you, we have lifted the shadows around our Sanctuary," said Vera softly. "And we have our own ways of traveling fast when we must, isolated though we are. We have waited for a summons like this, Harry." She cocked her head at him. "And you may, of course, take a few days to rest. If you wish, I will talk to anyone who objects."

Harry closed his eyes and swallowed. "I think you're talking to the only person who will," he said as lightly as he could.

“And do you have any more objections?”

Harry hesitated one moment. He supposed he didn't have to answer the latest letters from the Burkes and the Belvilles immediately. And there were not, as far as he knew, any battles to be planned for or attacks to be defended against in the next two days. And he was not the only possible source of comfort in the world. Connor had Remus, after all.

Can I do this? Do I really deserve it?

What if I assumed the answer was yes, and went from there?

“No,” he whispered. “I think I'll do this.”

“Good,” said Vera, her voice radiant. “That is very good, Harry.” Her footsteps moved towards him, and he opened his eyes to see her smiling down at him, one palm extended. “Shall we get out of the rain?”

Harry nodded, and, reaching up, clasped her hand.

Intermission: The Light and the Light Lord

It was like nothing he had experienced before.

One moment he stood, as always, in Still-Beetle confinement, unable to tell, from the faint connection that he still felt with Kingsley's mind, if his assassination attempt had succeeded as yet. There was not either the despair that Albus would have expected if Kingsley had failed completely, nor the wild triumph that would have signaled an assassination safely carried out. Nor had Kingsley died yet, as he should have under the wands of enraged Aurors, or at Harry's hands. Albus could not tell what was happening, and it puzzled him completely.

The next moment, a gryphon was in the room with him.

Albus eyed the creature cautiously. He was sure it could not be real—such an animal could not have flown throughout the Ministry without triggering half a hundred wards—but he was equally sure that someone powerful enough to project this illusion through all the spells that surrounded him was an enemy he should have heard of before now.

This was not Tom's illusion, he was almost sure of it. Tom would settle for a more direct approach.

The gryphon was made of some delicate substance, now white in color, now gold. It raised its eagle-head and stared around the small cell, deep in Tullianum, to which they had sent Albus with another Portkey. Its eyes were yellow, unforgiving, cold.

Albus let out a slow breath. Perhaps he had the identity of the gryphon's creator wrong. Perhaps his old friend had made it and sent it to rescue him. Certainly, the creature didn't seem to approve of the conditions in which the Ministry had chosen to keep Albus.

Then the yellow eyes turned on him, and he knew it was not so. The gryphon came from a foe. Its wings snapped up as it looked at him, and a low, long hiss, more suited to a serpent than either an eagle or a lion, came forth from its beak.

Albus felt his magic surge beneath the bounds of the Still-Beetle confinement. So far, he had not managed to break his imprisonment, and he had not really tried, since he wanted, if he managed to recover his reputation, to show the wizarding world that he had obeyed the due process of law and gone tamely to his fate. Yet he knew it was not impossible for him to step free of this; Harry had done it last Christmas when Lily confronted him. If need be, if he could summon the rage, then perhaps he could break free of his bonds and defend himself from the gryphon.

Yet wasn't it Harry's Dark magic that had shattered the Still-Beetle's hold? Albus was sure that he did not want to practice Dark Arts.

He hesitated, and into that hesitation, the gryphon spoke.

"Albus Dumbledore," it said, the hissing forming into words as the voices of snakes must when Harry or Tom spoke to them. "Did you ever think what you were doing, when you took the title of Light Lord upon yourself?"

Albus only regarded the gryphon calmly. This was a trick, he was certain now. Perhaps the Minister had learned something of his involvement with Kingsley. That was one possibility, that Kingsley had neither succeeded nor failed, but been captured and stopped. Well, Albus would wait until they ceased to suspect him—they would think it was only the lingering effects of the widespread compulsion that had driven him to this, not a second spell—and then sent him off again. Sooner or later, he would force Harry into a murder done with Dark Arts. He knew that Harry would turn to that, if Kingsley killed or sufficiently threatened someone he loved. And if Harry killed someone who was not a Death Eater, and not in the heat of battle, then public opinion would begin to swing against him. Albus would stand a much better chance of emerging unscathed from his own trial, particularly if Homer could bring Hestia to him again, or sneak in himself, and he could use a different sort of compulsion.

With the old compulsion itself gone, though, he would need a black reputation for Harry to build the new spell upon, to convince the Light

magic that he was fighting a deeply Dark opponent. And Kingsley would achieve that for him sooner or later.

The gryphon hissed again. Albus waited for it to go away. Surely a wizard of enough power to send it here would realize that it was not having the effect he wanted. He would withdraw it in disgust. Albus was not sure why he had sent it in the first place.

“You have not thought,” said the gryphon. “I will tell you. I have watched you for a long time, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. I sensed the power in you, and I waited, and hoped. You declared yourself a Light Lord after you turned from the vates path, and you promised that you would do good among the people of the wizarding world. You were a compeller, but you promised to do good, and promises can counteract the darkest of inborn intentions. Free will is the most wonderful of gifts, and I trusted you to use your compulsion in the defense of the free will of others.

“You battled the Dark Lord Grindelwald, and so emerged fully into your power. The magic on which you drew was contented. The song of the sun and the moon and the stars in their spheres was not unknown to you. You heard it in your dreams. You might have gone on growing, to become one with the Light in a way that no one has managed since Calypso McGonagall.

“Alas, that you did not do so.” The gryphon’s voice descended into a whisper. “Alas, that you have become what you are now.”

Albus was now sure that this must be a sending of Tom’s, or Harry’s; they were the only other wizards in Britain now, besides his mentor, powerful enough to have heard the song of the spheres in their dreams, and his mentor would never do something like this to him. He waited for it to be done. Of course, in the Still-Beetle confinement, he could do little else, but he could and did refuse to let the words make an impact on his brain. No illusion would make him doubt his choices. They remained as they had always been—regrettable, some of them, but inevitable.

“You changed,” said the gryphon. “You began to make sacrifices. That would not have sufficed to change your good intentions to twisted ones, if they had been sacrifices that you made yourself. But you asked them of others. You bent their wills with tactics that any Light Lord should have scorned. A true Lord of Light has no need of compulsion to enforce his will, nor deceptions and subterfuge and glamours to make others believe that which is not true.”

Albus was sure now that this apparition had come from Harry. The words about free will proclaimed it—they were not words that Tom would have used—and so did the thick disdain for his use of compulsion. He felt a surge of sadness. Harry, this is why I must be free, and why you must surrender to my will or be slain. I still wish you alive, and that is why I have refrained as long as I have. I am almost glad that Kingsley did not assassinate you, now. But if you continue to trouble me, I shall have no choice. We will find someone else to take your place in the prophecy. There are those who love your brother, or can be persuaded to.

“And even now you doubt me,” said the gryphon. “Even now you think this is a falsehood. You have fallen so far into yourself that you have lost the ability to distinguish between truth and lies. Only a short time ago, you were desperate. Do you remember that? You were convinced that you needed to destroy the vates. And now, you think that you are glad that you did not succeed, because you believe you can still control him. Your thoughts run and flow like water, molding themselves around you, so that you can think anything rather than think that you are wrong.”

A frisson of unease slid down Albus’s spine, hurting a bit, as his frozen muscles could not shiver. Then he told himself this was nonsense, because the creature must be guessing; Harry could not truly know what was in his head.

“I have come because I think now that there is no chance you will ever change,” said the gryphon. It moved forward, its feathers rippling like light on water. “I waited on opportunity after opportunity for redemption, and you have never taken any of them. The Dark does not care what its Lords do in its name. I care for mine. You have lost the right to call yourself a Light Lord. Even cornered, you do not admit

the cornering. Even presented with proof of your wrong, you do not admit the wrong. And that is not what a Light Lord should do. A Light Lord must see.”

The gryphon loomed over him. Albus could no longer observe its eyes clearly. That was all right. This was magic, very strange magic, of course, but ultimately the product of a frustrated boy’s mind.

The gryphon bowed its head, clenched its beak on what seemed a corner of the air, and ripped his ability to practice Light magic away.

Albus felt the comfort, the center of his life, the warmth that beamed in the center of his chest and which he always reached for instead of Dark Arts, blaze and then fade. Frantically, he groped for it, a purely internal movement, like the race of his thoughts. He could still do magic, there was no doubt of that; his power was still there. But he found that he could not remember the incantations for Light spells. He could not remember the words that would have framed them, nor the will that would have driven them in the proper direction. He was like someone deaf for years, who could not remember what voices sounded like, though he knew that voices had once existed for him.

Nothing could have taken the ability to perform Light magic from him—

But the Light itself.

And there was the truth, after all. Confronted with his lost ability, Albus screamed silently, and stared at the gryphon, the manifestation of a magic he had ceased to hear in his dreams years ago, and had never more than half believed in for itself.

“It is done,” said the gryphon. “I cannot touch the Dark Arts; they are yours. But you are not a Light Lord any longer. I do not accept you. I turn my back on you.”

It faded, and Albus was left, spinning above a gulf of blankness, to confront his new reality.

On and on it went, long moments of reaching for certainties and having them fall out from under him, of clutching at cherished dreams and feeling them tatter. Then he found the one that did not unravel, and clung to it.

It was his love for his world, the world he had tried and striven so hard to protect, made so many sacrifices for, demanded so many sacrifices for. It could not tear, because all his being was bound up in it. Albus clung close and fast to it, and wished that he could close his eyes.

Our world is in more danger than ever before. I do not know if I can even command the spell on Kingsley any more, or the Order of the Phoenix, and I cannot call out to my mentor.

And then he paused, because he felt his magic still squirming in him, and there were all the Dark Arts incantations in his head, spells he had used before with only the greatest reluctance.

But needs must when a vates is in the world.

There were ways. Yes, there were ways. Albus felt his frantic heartbeat—which, under the Still-Beetle confinement, he was probably imagining—slowing. Hadn't he thought this would happen someday? Hadn't one of his dreams for years been that he lay in the mud of a battlefield, looking up at Tom, and heard the voice of their young savior behind him even as Tom incanted the Killing Curse? He had died content in those dreams, knowing that another was taking up the burden of saving their world, soothing it, settling it and protecting it from violent change.

Now he knew that neither Connor nor Harry was going to do that, at least not willingly, and he didn't possess the ability to gently make them do it, either. Even if he passed his own trial unscathed, other would find out what he was now the moment he began using Dark magic.

But there was another who could take up the burden.

Albus had known his mentor did not want to be disturbed. He had walked long and far, into strange pathways, and had not claimed the Light Lord title that he could, by right, because of the seclusion he lived in. But he had bestirred himself to advise Albus about Harry several months ago, and if there were absolutely no other choice, then he would come forth, and take over Albus's burden.

Albus needed a way of sending a message to him, though.

And since he had only Dark Arts now, and no way of knowing when Homer or Hestia might be able to come for him, it would take much more maneuvering than it would have before.

Carefully, wrapped in love and bounded by Dark, he began to plan.

Chapter Forty-Seven: A Port in the Storm

Harry settled down with Vera in a small room on the sixth floor, furnished with thickly cushioned chairs—white, Harry wasn't surprised to see, not after his glimpse of the Sanctuary in Peter's mind last year—and with a fire blazing in a hearth larger than even the one in the hospital wing. Harry eyed the chairs cautiously. The wood appeared to have whorls of red in it. He didn't think that kind of wood was ever used for chairs at Hogwarts.

He glanced at Vera, who simply smiled. "We bring a bit of the Sanctuary with us when we come to stay somewhere, Harry," she said quietly. "And yes, I did clear this with your Headmistress. I could do nothing else, not when I hope to be by your side for a few months."

A few months? Harry blinked. He hadn't planned on that. He had planned on one of the Seers writing him, actually, with comfortably long gaps between the letters. He swallowed, and said, "I thought that Seers grew inundated with the sight of other souls, and had to retreat to the Sanctuary every once in a while?"

"And that is why I shall be here until my gift gets the better of me," Vera said. "But it will be some time before that happens, and I have long wanted to help you, Harry." Her face grew brilliant with an expression that wasn't really a smile. "You do not know how pleased I was when you wrote to me, and with no sign that someone else was forcing you to set quill to parchment."

Harry swallowed a few times. He could do this. Just because it was going to be harder than he'd expected was no reason to abandon it. And he had made the decision on his own. That was important. It was not like the decision to bring his parents to trial or face Voldemort, which, important as they had turned out to be, had their ultimate origin in other people's choices. This was born of his confrontation with himself in the Room of Requirement. He had to take an active part in his own healing, or it was foredoomed to fail.

And how many horrible things had he faced and fought his way through before?

“Did someone force you to write to me, Harry?” Vera’s voice was still soft, but tight now with anger. “If someone did—”

Harry lifted his head and shook it. “No. I did that on my own. And I’m ready to face what you have to tell me.”

Vera nodded, the brilliant look appearing again. She leaned forward. Harry tensed instinctively, but she was too far away from him to cup his face, though it looked as if she would have liked to.

“You will not be surprised,” she murmured, “to learn that you don’t really regard yourself as human, not yet. That is one of the things you must learn.”

Harry huffed and crossed his arms. “I thought I had made more progress than that. I don’t think of myself as less important than other people any more.”

“Your first thoughts are still of them, Harry.”

“And is that a bad thing?” Harry frowned as he thought of the short-sighted selfishness that had prompted the Ravenclaws’ actions against him, that had prompted Connor’s behavior in first year, that had made James into the kind of man he was, along with cowardice. “So many people think of themselves first. I might be a bit less selfish than most, but—”

“You know that it can hurt you,” said Vera softly. “More, it can hurt others. What happens if you take a curse for someone else and die in battle, Harry? What will happen to those who follow you, honor you, love you?”

Harry could feel his frown growing more pronounced. They shouldn’t fight on one side of the war just because of a person. That’s like the Light families only fighting because Dumbledore led them, not because they think Voldemort’s an evil person or his ideals are wrong. I’ll have to show them that the ideals I represent are worth struggling for all on their own.

“What happens to your bond with your Malfoy if you do things only to please him?” Vera asked.

Harry’s face burned. Somehow, in the noble, high-minded moment when he had decided to contact Vera, he had forgotten that this would inevitably lead to discussion of Draco, and the physical pleasure that Draco was so eager to share with him. “He wouldn’t like it,” he admitted, once he saw that Vera was waiting for an answer and his embarrassment wouldn’t save him. “He’s said more than once that he wants me to reach out to him because I want to.”

Vera nodded. “So that is another thing you must learn to do. I think that learning to regard yourself as human and fallible comes first. But a good bit of selfishness would not go amiss. Listen to your own thoughts, the ones you ordinarily try to dismiss, the whims and momentary ideas.”

“You sound like Madam Shiverwood,” Harry complained.

“The woman who first tried to make you think about your abuse?” Vera cocked her head thoughtfully. “Well, I do not think it is necessary to make you regard the trial in any particular way. You have taken care of that very thoroughly on your own. You have spoken for your parents—I can see the cut that made on your soul—and that is all you owe them. But you must still deal with the legacy they have inflicted on you.”

Harry squirmed, keeping his eyes on his hand, which was clenched in a fist on his knee. “I meant that she wanted me to indulge my whims and do something pleasurable for myself once a day.”

“I do not think that is terrible advice, though too limited,” said Vera calmly. “You disagree?”

“I just—” Harry wondered if he should phrase the idea differently, then decided that the phrasing was probably exactly the kind of thing Vera needed to hear. “I just don’t see the point,” he said. “They’re small things. Fleeting things. Whims, the way you and she both spoke of them. What good will it do if I decide to go flying for an hour one day? I might want to go flying, but I couldn’t abandon the Charms essay I’m

working on, or the political letter I have to write, for the sake of indulging myself. They're small. They don't matter."

"And if someone else wanted to go flying?" Vera asked. "Someone who had been through a trial—not a literal one, mind you, but a period of difficulty?" Harry's mind skipped to Edith Bulstrode. "Would you think it was unimportant, if you believed it would aid their healing?"

"Of course not!" Harry exclaimed.

"And what if this would aid your own healing, Harry?"

"This is one of those places where you think I don't regard myself as human, isn't it," said Harry flatly.

"Isn't it?" Vera turned the question back on him.

"I just—" Harry leaned his head back on the chair and scowled at the ceiling. Instead of turning aside into the answers his training provided him, he tried to make himself ask the question head-on. Why should it be so different for him? If Edith could go flying because she wanted to, and it would help ease the lash-marks on her soul, why shouldn't he be able to do the same?

He did have an answer in a moment, one he didn't think Vera could refute. "Because I have responsibilities," he said softly. "I don't believe that I can do everything that needs to be done in a day and then push aside the rest until some unspecified time while I enjoy myself. Free time is just a myth."

"For you," said Vera.

But not for other people. Harry wished she would stop doing that. Now his mind was coming up with the answers on its own.

"I'm a leader," said Harry. "People told me that I needed to accept that for so long, and I finally have. I'm vates, and I need to be a war leader, and I suppose I'm a political leader, too." He made a face as he thought about it. He understood the pureblood dances, but so

many of those were based on manners, or reciprocal gifts, or strength of magic—all things that his training had prepared him to deal with and accept as good standards for judgment. Politics seemed to be based mostly on people indulging their greed for more money and power, an impulse Harry couldn't comprehend, and feeding their ridiculous prejudices, something he was determined to stop. "So doesn't that mean that I should spend as much time as I can fulfilling my responsibilities?"

"As much time as you can? Perhaps. But do you really think that someone like Rufus Scrimgeour spends all his time working in politics alone, Harry, with never a moment for indulgence or himself?"

Harry was feeling decidedly cranky by this point. He was probably going to have some sort of revelation any moment, and he didn't like them. They hurt. "He sleeps, of course," he said shortly. "And I think he has a tea moment in the mornings that's not to be interrupted. And he's not married, but he probably doesn't scrabble among paperwork all the time."

"Then why can't you do the same?" Vera again cocked her head, like a bird eyeing a crumb it was about to peck up. "Do what you must, do what you can, do what opportunity presses you to do in the arena of politics, but then turn back and take some time for yourself. Fly, spend time with your Malfoy..." A moment later, she trailed off with a sigh. "That is another thing you will need to do, Harry. Find pleasures that do not involve protecting and saving people."

"Learn to be selfish," said Harry.

Vera nodded. "And now, I asked you a question. Why can't you do the same?"

Harry hunched his shoulders. He hated the answer he was going to give. He knew it wasn't an adequate answer. But he didn't think that he had another one right now. "It's just different for me, that's all."

"And why is that?"

"You're not going to give up, are you?" Harry asked her, with a sharp glance.

"No," Vera agreed peaceably.

Harry sighed. "Because my mother trained me to think of myself as different," he said. "As someone who didn't need as much as other people—as much pleasure, as much human contact, as much sleep, as much freedom from pain. And I know that's the answer, but I can't help thinking she was right in this much, most of the time. I mean, I can do this. Why shouldn't I?"

"And you know the answer to that, too, where you would not have a year ago," Vera murmured.

Harry clenched his hand. "Yes," he said. "Because I deserve as much indulgence as anyone else."

"I would call it a normal life, rather than indulgence," said Vera softly. "Not being struck with pain curses seems normal to me, Harry. Tending to your own wants and needs seems normal. Balancing your intense devotion to the freedom of others with devotion to your own freedom is, perhaps, not normal, because most people carry a devotion only to their own freedom, but still something a vates should do. Unless you truly believe that a vates need not see himself as clearly as he sees others?"

"No," Harry whispered. "I do."

Vera made an abrupt, though still soft, noise of understanding. "Ah. That is what may be hindering you. I have not seen your soul in a year, Harry, and there are many changes to absorb. Until this moment, I was not sure how one new realization fitted in with the rest." She raised a hand and moved it through the air, as if she were trying to maneuver a piece of an invisible puzzle into place. "Your training in resistance to pleasure."

"I know that I have that," Harry said defensively. "I'm working with Draco to overcome it."

“Not just the pleasure of touch and human contact,” said Vera calmly. “Your mother conditioned you against all sorts of things.” She was still staring intently at the invisible puzzle. “The appreciation of the sweet taste of food. I suspect that may be one reason that you do not care that much about your meals, and can see eating only as fuel for your body, so that you may do more things for others. Does everything truly taste bland to you?”

“Not bland,” said Harry. “But I like porridge as well as anything else. It’s nourishing. It’s always on the table. I might as well eat it.”

Vera nodded. “And you do not think of sleep as a pleasure and a comfort, either, nor warmth. Thus you can ignore the need to rest in favor of doing something more—” She paused, and Harry was reminded of Snape reading his thoughts with Legilimency, though there was no sensation of someone else moving about in his mind. “Productive, I think, is the word you use. And you can stand in the cold rain, as you were on the Tower, without a thought of getting sick.”

“I could always use a warming charm,” Harry suggested. “I am a wizard.”

“But you did not.”

“I didn’t think of it.”

“You must learn to think of it,” said Vera softly. “This is connected to learning to think of yourself as human, Harry, not different from it. It may be even more urgent. You are well used to conducting intellectual debates on the rights of others, and you can learn to apply that kind of thinking to yourself. But you accept pleasure as something inherent to other people. The right of someone else to eat chocolate and appreciate it is not something that even enters your head as a subject of debate. On the same note, you accept it as something separate from yourself. It would not enter your head to work to overcome that, either.” She looked directly into Harry’s eyes. “You have said that you are working on overcoming your fear of touch with your Malfoy. Did you start doing that for his sake, or yours?”

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. Merlin, Draco would kill me if he knew. But Draco wasn't here right now, and Harry was almost certain Vera already knew the answer to this. "His," he whispered.

"That will not do, Harry," Vera said. "If he ever found out, it would devastate him. Granted, I have not seen his soul in a year, either, but I glimpsed him last Halloween. He was obsessed with equality then. He does not want to leave you behind, and he does not want to be left behind, either. He wants your bond to be as pleasurable for you as it is for him, a source of comfort and strength—and not because you are doing what he wants with something that you don't care that much about, your body. Try to learn to want this for its own sake, for your own sake."

"I am trying!" Harry opened his eyes and glared at her. "I am."

"And what happens then?"

"I panic and pull away from him as quickly as I can." Harry felt his cheeks burn again, but it was as much anger as embarrassment—anger mostly at himself, truth be told. "It feels too good. And what kind of a stupid idea is that to have?"

Vera shook her head. "That is another thing you cannot do, because you have done too much of it," she said. "Condemning yourself for trained reactions. Learn to see yourself clearly, Harry. Never stop pushing. You have grabbed hold of that lesson, or you would not have contacted me. But also know when to rest from pushing. Do not try to do too much at once. Remind yourself that this is a long road to walk, and the end may not be in sight for a time."

"I can live with not being like everyone else for a long time," said Harry, shifting restlessly. "I did it for years, after all. But I don't think Draco should have to live with it."

"Have you asked him how he feels about that?" said Vera. "I know he is more impatient than you are, but have you asked him?"

"Um. No."

“Well, then,” said Vera. “I think that should be your first task, Harry, before we speak again. Talk to him honestly. Learn what he wants, instead of waiting for him to show you or simply assuming it from his reactions.”

“I can do it,” Harry said, now looking down at his feet. “But it sounds so stupid to say it out loud.”

Vera didn’t reply, and when Harry chanced a glance up at her, he found that she was smiling, eyes shining with something that might have been recollection.

“I think you will find, Harry,” she said, “that even fifteen-year-old boys are more than willing to speak on the subject matter of what they want, when you ask them.”

Harry felt himself blush again. Vera stood from her chair and held out her hand to him.

“Have patience,” she murmured. “With me, with him, with yourself. That last most of all. I will be here when you wish to speak with me again.”

“It won’t be boring for you to just stay in Hogwarts?” Harry scrutinized her face.

“Your Headmistress has a very interesting soul,” said Vera happily. “So does the woman who is part dragon. Talking with them alone can take up a good deal of my time. And you should worry about yourself first.” She stooped and gave him a kiss on the forehead. “Speak with him when you are ready. Take these two days to rest, to sleep, to dream, to do what you must. You deserve a rest before the next push.”

Harry nodded, and then left the room, stretching and flexing his shoulders as if he had wings. He felt a bit lighter, though he couldn’t account for that. Perhaps it was his clothes finally drying from the rain. “Here I am, Harry.”

At least Harry wasn't writing letters when Regulus surprised him this time, because he had promised himself he wouldn't write any today. He was sitting on the bank of the lake, eyes closed and head leaning on a tree. Snape had obviously told Regulus where to find him, since Harry had set up a small charm to make people casually glance elsewhere. He didn't want any reporters interviewing him about being the Boy-Who-Lived this weekend.

"Regulus." He opened his eyes and smiled, standing with a stretch. He held out his hand, but was clasped and pulled into an embrace. Oh, well. I suspected that would happen.

"Are you all right?" Regulus murmured into his ear, his hands roughly massaging his spine. Harry wriggled back into the sensation instead of hunching his shoulders as was his instinctive response, and reflected wistfully that sometimes, yes, it really might be nice to have two hands. Then one could do things like Regulus was doing.

"Yes," said Harry. He received a snort and a sharp look of disbelief, and gave in. "Oh, all right, not completely. That's one reason I wanted to talk to you. I know I said I didn't want to talk about inheritances and bloodlines and things like that, and I still don't want to talk about being Black heir," he added warningly, as Regulus's face brightened like a firework. "But I did remember Narcissa telling me once that Silver-Mirror was the most peaceful of the Black houses. Is that true? Because I think I'd like to see it. I'd like to go somewhere soothing." Hogwarts was not that at the moment, with stares continually following him.

Regulus's face moved into a smug smile. "Of course, Harry. And I'm very glad that you're seeing the place where you might go for holidays in the future." He held up one hand and laughed when Harry glared at him. "Just kidding. Let's get beyond the wards, and I'll Side-Along Apparate you."

Harry nodded, and started to follow him, only to pause when he realized Regulus showed no sign of letting him go, but wanted to walk with an arm around his shoulders. Uneasily, Harry came up beside him and walked there.

Why are you uneasy? he thought, almost a ritual now after his talk with Vera last night. He had asked himself the same question when he woke this morning and immediately thought he should stop wasting time and get out of bed, and when he found himself avoiding foods he knew were sweet and savory for bland ones.

In this case, the answer was relatively simple. I don't think he likes touching me. Why should he? I'm just me, not a child related to him by blood.

Harry sighed and reminded himself that he knew the answer to the answer. He loves me. There's no rational reason for it that I know yet, but I know it's true. And he seems to love me just the way I am, without demanding that I become Black heir to satisfy him.

It was very strange. Harry knew that he still did best with conditional love, not unconditional. But he made some effort to relax, and by the time he and Regulus got beyond the wards, he no longer felt as though the arm around his shoulders were a burden too heavy to carry.

Regulus drew him towards him once they were near Hogsmeade, and they Apparated. This time, the jump felt even longer than it had to Copley-by-the-Sea. Harry wondered where they were going.

He found out when they appeared inside a shining place. Harry tilted his head back, staring. It looked as though they were at the center of a giant mirror, which he supposed was only appropriate, given the name of the place. But this was golden, not silver.

They stood on an immense round floor, beneath an immense round ceiling, in the center of which a single pool of golden light shone, like sunbeams continually gathered and given out again. Harry could see other colors moving in the pool—it wasn't as bright as the sun, though he had afterimages dancing in front of his eyes when he looked away—but they always melted back into gold, into rich shades of life and light. No drops appeared to fall from the pool, except along slender chains that led to lamps on the walls. They would inch down, fill in the lamps and glimmer through the casings of what looked to Harry like dragonbone, and then inch back to the pool. Thus, under

the dominant effect of the shifting pool, other radiances came slowly to life and as slowly died, and strange shadows sprang up and then descended again.

He traced his glance down the walls at last, but couldn't tell what they were made of; the light danced on them in a way that might have fit metal, or wood, or stone. They were crowded with numerous paintings, though. Harry took a step forward, staring at a landscape of trees he had never seen before. Their leaves were silver-blue, and they rippled in a wind that seemed to blow on Harry's face as he stood in front of the picture. Startled, he blinked.

"Welcome to Silver-Mirror, Harry," Regulus said softly. "Though it could just as well be called Golden-Mirror, really." He nodded at the paintings around the walls. "This is the place where the Blacks keep our most intensely magical possessions. They're not weapons, but they are works of art."

"What do they do?" Harry whispered. He had no doubt the pictures were wizarding portraits, but he had never seen as many without people before, and usually they depicted places more realistic and ordinary than these seemed to. He could see, besides the forest one that kept drawing his attention, one that showed a road seemingly made of starlight running under a dark sky, and one that came out on a high mountain ledge with a blue crystalline door to the side, and one that showed a sea made of fire, like a more violent version of the golden pool above their heads.

Regulus said nothing, but he was grinning when Harry looked over his shoulder. "Touch one and find out," he invited.

Harry eyed his grin—it looked like the kind the Weasley twins used when they got up to an especially good prank—but he faced the forest one and stretched out his hand.

The sensation of wind grew stronger as he reached for it, and then he felt enveloped, as though he had stumbled over a cliff into a long drop. But there was cool earth beneath his feet, and a murmur of leaves over his head, and sweet air singing in his ears.

Harry lifted his head and stared in disbelief. He was beneath the silver-blue trees, which were revealed as giants, standing many times higher than his own head, their bark silver with swirling white patterns. The air around him was fresher than any he had ever smelled, even on the Northumberland beach at Midsummer. The grass was actually moss, which gave beneath his feet with a sighing musical sound and a scent like strawberries.

I don't believe this, Harry thought, in a daze.

He turned his head, to see a picture on the trunk of the tree directly behind him. It gave a confused golden glimpse of Silver-Mirror, which Harry thought he wouldn't have known how to make out if he hadn't been there before. Regulus's head was in the middle of it, grinning madly.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" he asked.

Harry looked up at the trees around him again. This time, he could see things moving in the branches, as graceful and quick as monkeys, but with what looked like five legs. "What is this?" he whispered.

Regulus heard him, luckily, and answered. "Doors to other worlds," he said. "We think. One of my ancestors, Neptune Black, painted them. We don't know for certain if he made them up, or if he just had dreams of real other places and painted them. I think they're real, though, because another of my ancestors found the artifact that Silver-Mirror is named for in one of them and brought it out. Old Neptune can't have dreamed everything."

"I have to admit," said Harry, tilting his head back as he heard a song falling in the distance like chiming crystal, "I don't know why the Blacks haven't become filthy rich bringing out artifacts from these other worlds."

"It doesn't work like that," said Regulus softly. "Either Neptune didn't want it to work like that, or it was something inherent in his gift. You can only go into one of these portraits for an artistic or healing or protective motive. You could go to find a weapon that would let you help others, for example, but not a jeweled sword that you could sell

for hundreds of Galleons. If you try to come here with a selfish motive, it's just a pretty picture."

Harry nodded slowly; he could see some of the drawbacks. "And of course you might not find what you were looking for in one picture, and you'd have to spend a lot of time searching all of them."

Regulus made a little sound of agreement. "There are a few closely guarded secrets about some of the portraits, about what they lead to—maps of their worlds. I can't reveal those even to you until you agree to become Black heir, thanks to the magic in them." He happily ignored Harry's mutter about "if I become Black heir." "But they're a wonderful heritage for someone like you, Harry. I know you would appreciate them."

Harry felt a twinge in his chest, something shifting in his head. He thought he was having an idea, but he couldn't make out the dimensions of it as yet. He asked slowly, "Can you send someone else into a picture?"

Regulus had his brows arched when Harry looked at him again. "Yes, you can. But you'd have to be pretty cunning to convince them to just go. Most wizards can sense the danger in a picture like this instinctively. And once someone outside the picture turns it to face the wall, that person can't come back again."

Harry snorted lightly. "So there goes my great plan for capturing Voldemort," he said, but he tucked the idea into a corner of his brain. It might yet be useful.

Regulus grinned ruefully. "Yes. I told him all about these pictures when I was still a Death Eater. It's one reason he wanted to take Silver-Mirror, why he was happy to have the Black heir as part of his entourage. He thought he could at least arrange to sell the pictures to raise money for his Death Eaters." He extended a hand through the frame. "Ready to come back now?"

Harry took his hand, and once again stepped into what felt like a fall. But then he was standing on the floor of the circular room again.

“How many pictures are there?” he asked.

“An even thirteen,” said Regulus happily. “One each for the thirteen blazing dreams Neptune Black had throughout his life. I can’t wait until you do accept your inheritance, Harry. Then I can tell you all about the one that I think might be most—” Abruptly, his face paled, and he put one hand over his heart. Harry took a step towards him, his own heartbeat quickening in fear, but Regulus stood back up and shook his head wryly. “I’m fine,” he reassured Harry. “Just came too close to a secret the magic doesn’t want me to share until you’re actually confirmed.”

Harry frowned. “That’s strange, you know. I don’t think James’s inheritance ever did that to him with Lux Aeterna.” He was proud of himself, to find that he could say James’s name without trembling. But why should he tremble? The man was nothing to him now, certainly not his father. “It did just what he wanted, in fact. The wards kept out anyone he didn’t like.”

Regulus snorted. “That’s because the damn thing’s a linchpin. Light wizards and their linchpins!”

Harry narrowed his eyes. He had known that most Dark families didn’t use linchpins, but he had assumed the operation of their inheritance magic wasn’t that different. Obviously, he’d been wrong. He knew more about magical than blood heirs, and more about sheer formal customs of inheritance, such as the acknowledgement festivals held for magical heirs, than either. Information about just how exactly Dark purebloods transferred property and money down the family line wasn’t easy to come by for someone born outside their circles, even Lily Potter or Dumbledore, while many dances were a matter of public record. “So the Black houses aren’t linked to the earth?”

Regulus shook his head. “Each inheritance is linked to a person. It’s a subtle difference to most people, I grant you, but real. That’s why it was so important that Sirius—” His voice faltered on his brother’s name, then became brisk once more. “That Sirius have a spell designating him the Black heir,” he finished. “If he’d left it alone, the properties would still have belonged to me, since technically I was still

alive. And if I had been dead, and Sirius hadn't cast certain specific magic, then the inheritance would have gone to Bellatrix—not in common to Bellatrix and her sisters. That was part of the purpose of the pureblood dances, you know, to sound out who was best suited to be heir. It was the eldest child most of the time, since they'd have longer to train and prove themselves worthy before their parents died, but not always. Most Dark pureblood inheritances are bound to a person, and they'll have conditions that can be changed—like the openness of the wards—and ones that can't—like the charms locking my lips shut about those damn maps to anyone other than my heir.”

Harry stared at him, fascinated. “But then shouldn't Narcissa have been unable to remove the weapons from the Black houses that she did?”

Regulus shrugged. “No. My ancestors considered old Neptune's pictures the most valuable things the Blacks owned. There are protective charms on them, and on the vaults and the houses, but not on a lot of the other minor treasures we have. The current owner would have to specify, with rituals, that certain things could pass only to his heir if he really wanted to guard them. Sirius never thought he would have to, of course. As it was, since Narcissa could get in through the wards, and she was of Black blood, she could take almost anything she wanted.”

“Could a Light family's inheritance be linked to a single person that way?” Harry asked.

Regulus snorted. “Of course. But good luck getting any of them to agree to it.”

I bet Connor would, Harry thought feverishly. Maybe even Augustus Starrise, now that he's my ally. And that would remove at least one linchpin, perhaps two.

He had some idea how to free the northern goblins now. He found himself smiling, and Regulus smiled back.

“I really didn't bring you here to discuss inheritance,” Regulus said. “I promised. So come on, then, and we'll see the artifact that gave

Silver-Mirror its name.” He clapped Harry on the back and led him towards a door on the far wall which, with the charms of this room, Harry hadn’t even noticed. “You might have realized that a few of the other houses have elemental affiliations,” Regulus commented over his shoulder. “Number Twelve Grimmauld Place doesn’t, not really, but Copley-by-the-Sea is water, and Wayhouse is earth, since it was built of wood. This is fire.” He nodded to the golden pool overhead.

Harry simply raised his eyebrows as he followed him through the door, but he felt his expression change with the movement of the air around him.

“And this part of Silver-Mirror,” Regulus whispered in his ear, “is wind.”

Harry couldn’t respond. For one thing, he wasn’t entirely sure that Regulus would hear him at anything other than a shout, but for another, he didn’t think the words could get around the lump in his throat.

They stood on a narrow balcony, beyond which probably lay a staircase. Harry couldn’t say for sure, because his eyes hadn’t adjusted that far yet. The immediate portion of the room was as dark as a cave, and led his gaze downwards, to Silver-Mirror itself.

A turning, shining pool lay there, like a complement to the golden one in the entrance room. Harry didn’t think it was water, though, not after Regulus’s words. It was wind made visible, crashing waves of air. It was beautiful, and even more alive than the shifting fire had been.

And sound. Sound was everywhere, stroking his ears, murmuring with music. Harry heard nothing ugly there, or, if there was something ugly, it was taken up and woven into the immense pattern so that it sounded as natural and beautiful as the rest. The songs of sirens were there without the awful enchantment, and Fawkes’s voice, and the wild symphony of the frenzied Dark, and thunder, and the dash of falling rain, and voices singing lullabies.

Harry found himself putting out his hand. His sight was adjusting, now, to that intense, faraway silver light, and he could make out winged shapes skimming through the air.

Birds.

They came and went, magical and mundane, wheeling in great flocks, though so enormous was the room that Harry didn't feel overwhelmed by their numbers. He felt the same kind of exaltation he did when he was on his broom as he watched them: soaring, swooping, diving, folding their wings and plunging into Silver-Mirror as if it were water, circling, fluttering, nearly colliding with one another. Their voices trickled in and out of the din, which gave them back sounds as it chose, so that sometimes a swan's voice seemed to come out of an eagle's beak, or a phoenix's sweet tunes from a Diricawl as it continually appeared and disappeared in midair. Harry tried to make out an order to their movements, but couldn't. Or perhaps one existed, but it was beyond him.

He felt his mind clear as he watched them. By the time he came back to himself again, he'd had muscles relax that felt as if they had been tense since the trial, and Regulus had one arm firmly wrapped around his shoulders, and he didn't mind at all.

"This is brilliant," he whispered.

Regulus just squeezed his shoulder, and didn't make any comment about inheritance at all, letting him simply be absorbed in his watching.

Harry ran his fingers through his hair, then told himself to stop that, because he was messing it up.

No, wait, his hair was always messy. He should stop this because he had no reason to be nervous. Draco was hardly going to object to what he wanted to say.

He entered his bedroom quietly, and jumped when he realized Blaise and Ginny were involved in a sloppy kiss against the far wall. He

looked only long enough to make sure that Draco wasn't on his bed, then slipped out and shut the door behind him.

"Awful, isn't it?"

Harry jumped a second time; Draco was right beside him on the stairs. He shook his head at Harry. "They're not done yet? I thought it was odd that Blaise asked for an hour of 'study time' this afternoon, but, well, he's cleared out of the room for us before. I can at least repay the favor."

"Let's go somewhere else private, then, because I want to talk to you," Harry told him.

Draco's eyebrows rose, and he stared hard at Harry. Harry stared hard right back.

Draco smiled a bit, then, his lips quirking. He nodded. "Will I need the Pensieve?"

"Yes, if you want it," said Harry, startled. He'd intended to keep his promise to Draco about putting his mindset in the Pensieve for Draco to experience, but he hadn't thought he'd keep it so soon. Then he shrugged. Oh, well. If he does have questions about why I'm talking to him like this, then he can understand them better once he experiences things from my side.

Draco opened the door and sneaked into the bedroom to retrieve the Pensieve. That gave Harry a chance to lean back against the wall and ask himself why the hell he was so nervous.

Because I don't like all of this intensity focused on me. It can be focused on someone else, just not on me.

Harry snorted a moment later. He could understand Vera now when she said that wasn't good enough. He was becoming tired of his own insecurity on that score. He might not comprehend exactly why yet Draco was willing to focus so much on him, but he accepted that Draco wanted to. And he had admitted to himself that he was in love with Draco.

You can do worse than indulge that, I think.

Draco came back out a moment later, flourishing the Pensieve in triumph. They went upstairs to find an abandoned classroom, and, on the way, Harry decided to look at Draco and think about him without scolding himself for such silly and inappropriate thoughts.

It was remarkably easy, once he gave it free rein. He'd thought things like this before, he realized now, but had pushed them into the Occlumency pools rather than deal with them. Once he'd got past the first acknowledgement of his own desire, he could start thinking that it wasn't silly or inappropriate after all.

Draco's way of movement attracted him, he had to admit. It was partially training, born of pureblood dances that warned against revealing too much emotion with a careless gesture, but Harry knew exactly how someone trained exclusively in that way moved; Lucius Malfoy was like that. It made him into nothing so much as a breathing statue, lovely in stillness, too graceful in motion.

Draco blended that grace with a more human jerkiness, a remnant of the boy Harry remembered who had dragged him around half Hogwarts by one arm in first and second year. He paused to look around a corner and make sure they weren't being observed, and then pulled his head back with a sharp oath as someone else came out of a door down the hall. He made constant arm-movements that showed his impatience. He tossed the Pensieve from hand to hand because he could. He did freeze up around his father, but away from Lucius, Harry could see Narcissa's influence, the naturalness she'd passed on to her son.

Yes, so that attracted him, he told himself, pushing himself forward to consider these things, regardless of how silly it felt. And what else?

How expressive Draco's face was—again, not something that a good pureblood wizard should necessarily show, but something Draco did. His eyes always showed an intense awareness and aliveness, an awakening to the world. Every part of his face was involved in his every emotion, not just a short curl of his lips for his disdain. His

eyebrows would cant down and his cheeks would tighten and his eyes would get into the act, too.

And I never realized I paid enough attention to him to notice all that.

Harry swallowed nervously. He had accused himself, several times, of taking Draco for granted. Finding out he hadn't been, at least on some levels, was unnerving.

It does mean I can change, then. I'm human somewhere under all this training, and I don't know myself that well.

And that was terrifying.

"Harry?"

Harry started and glanced up. Draco had one hand reached out towards him, the other clutching the Pensieve white-knuckled. Harry let himself drink in the brightness of those eyes with concern, the way Draco had his head tilted to one side, the sharp angle of his eyebrows.

"Are you all right?" Draco whispered.

Harry nodded. "Just realizing that you're beautiful to me in several ways," he said. Oh, Merlin, let that not be soppy. Please.

But even if it was soppy, the look that came over Draco's face immediately afterwards was worth it. Draco moved several steps nearer, and then cupped his chin and raised it. His eyes were intense, as piercing as thorns, but Harry felt the courage to offer himself up to them anyway. He won't hurt me. I know he won't hurt me. He would never hurt me.

Draco moved his face slowly nearer, but Harry was the one who leaned the rest of the way to initiate the kiss. That surprised a noise out of Draco that was certainly startled and might have been indignant, but Harry knew exactly how to silence that. He opened his mouth and let Draco slip his tongue inside.

Draco tried to say his name, but this, Harry decided immediately, was difficult when his tongue was where it was. Then his other hand slipped around Harry's neck to hold him in place, dropping the Pensieve, and he was kissing Harry frantically, as if he thought the training would kick in at any moment.

The training was trying to kick in. Harry could feel shivers running up his spine that were not all pleasure, could feel the screaming thoughts that said he shouldn't feel this good, he didn't have the right—

Fuck off, he told his own thoughts, and put his Occlumency to good use, swallowing the protests of his training. There was sudden, wonderful silence in his head, silence that filled almost at once with the cloudy feeling he'd experienced the night Marietta used the Blood Whip Curse on him and Draco had tried to coax Harry to tell him his attacker's name.

Harry tilted his head back, slipped his own arms around Draco's neck and waist, and put his own tongue to good use, surprising another one of those strangled sounds out of Draco. The cloudy feeling grew thicker and more intense, a sharp warmth invaded his belly, and Harry wondered if this was what eating chocolate was like for other people.

Draco drew slowly backwards at last, and stared down at Harry with his eyes alive in an expression that Harry definitely wanted to see again. Harry reached out and ran his hand down Draco's chest, pulling back only reluctantly as he realized the cloudy feeling and the warmth lingered in his own body, and his training was protesting more strongly than it had before.

"Sorry," he said.

"You have absolutely nothing to be sorry about." Draco's voice had deepened, and Harry found those intense eyes still focused on him when he looked up. They weren't as far above him as they would have been a month ago, only an inch or two, and Harry grinned as he realized what that meant. I'm getting another growth spurt, then. I might even be taller than he is one day.

"I suppose not," he agreed. "Do you want to do the Pensieve, still?"

"I'd rather hear what brought that kiss on." Draco couldn't stop looking at his lips as he said that. It amused Harry entirely too much, and even though the cloudy feeling and the warmth had knocked him somewhat off balance, he grinned as he nodded up the hall.

"Don't you think we should get into the classrooms we were making for, and not have this conversation out in the hall where anyone could hear us?"

Horror flashed across Draco's face at the thought, and then another intense look, though different by several degrees from the one he'd been giving Harry before. "Of course," he said. "I'm not sharing you with anyone."

Harry rolled his eyes as Draco picked up the Pensieve, then dragged him up the hallway by one arm. Honestly. Like other people would want me with the same degree of possessiveness he does.

All the same, Harry thought it was a good thing to get into a room where they could lock the door with spells, both because he wasn't comfortable with anyone else seeing the way he acted around Draco yet and because he could easily imagine someone else wanting Draco the way he did. So, all in all, it was better just to get out of sight.

When they'd locked the door behind them, and Draco had cast several layers of wards, he turned around and demanded, "Well?"

"Vera's here," said Harry simply. "She came last night. She suggested I talk to you about what you want. I know what I do." He eyed Draco's face. "I'm surprised you had the strength to stop when you did, given how much you want," he murmured.

Draco sat down in a chair as if his legs had given out. Unfortunately, the chair turned out to be broken, and dumped him on the floor amid an immense puff of dust. Harry started to snicker, but stopped when Draco raised his head.

The intense look was back in his eyes. Harry swallowed.

"I want everything you can give me," said Draco. "All of what you are, Harry. I want to know things you don't even think are important about yourself yet, like what kind of tea is your favorite. I want to know that no one else means as much to you as I do. I want to be the only person you want in your bed. I want to know that you understand the things I believe in even if you don't agree with them. I want you to yell at me without holding anything back, even your magic. I want you to know my moods well enough that you know without my speaking when I need to be held, or fetched a sweet, or left alone. I want to have that kind of closeness to you that depends on choice more than it does need, and makes everyone jealous who sees it. I want sunlight love. I told you that, once, last year."

Harry nodded, swallowing. It was a demanding list, and he could think of several things on it that he could not imagine, say, Parvati asking of Connor. But Draco was demanding. He had shown that well enough when their bond was just friendship.

And he wants those things of me.

Like the fact that Draco loved him, it was just something that had to be accepted. And it sent a shiver of sweetness down Harry's spine, and a tremor of a smugness that he didn't understand at all.

He wants those things of me.

Harry blinked at nothing. And? So? If he wanted them of someone else, we wouldn't even be having this conversation.

The smugness stayed there anyway. Harry shivered again. He would have to learn plenty of things about himself, it seemed.

He stepped nearer to Draco and held out his hand. "And I want to give them to you," he said, holding Draco's eyes. "Some of them will take longer than others."

"I. Don't. Care."

Harry tried to speak, but he thought he was probably going to sound stupid if he did. He settled for pulling Draco to his feet and wrapping him fiercely in his arms, settled for feeling warm, and safe, and loved.

Except that that's not settling, not at all.

Chapter Forty-Eight: Back Into the Raging World

Harry sighed as he sat in the Slytherin common room and stared down at the stack of letters the owls—and one large, proud, black-shouldered gull come from the Isle of Man—had delivered over the weekend. He had to deal with them now, since it was Monday morning, the end of his weekend of relaxation, and visions of letters piling up on his bed canopy and crushing him had plagued him last night. He reached for the ones he knew he was going to dislike most, the letters from Compton Belville and Adelina Burke, first.

A few minutes later, he was gaping at the letters, and wondering if they were some practical joke. But no, when he fetched his last letters from the Burkes and Belvilles and compared them to the writing on these, the hand was the same. Harry sat back on the couch, feeling almost nerveless.

It seemed that the trial had changed Compton Belville's mind about him rather decisively.

Dear Harry:

I will give no last name, as I have just heard that you renounced your last name. Congratulations on your victory in the trial. After what your parents did to you, it would have been a waste for them to die and escape punishment so easily, and if they were free, they would not have lasted long. I would have taken a hand in insuring that myself, were I not sure that many, many more who deserve to take vengeance for you would get there before I could.

Forgive me for having doubted you. I did think you were a child who could be easily approached and toyed with, that you knew nothing of the way the world really worked, because you did not use your magical power to gain what you wanted. I see now that you were playing with a subtler hand. Lords often do, and those of us who can only look at them in awe tend to miss those subtleties in our own envy.

I would like to offer you my family's help in your alliance, specifically your next battle with the Dark Lord. We are older wizards and witches,

with the exception of Mortimer, but not without experience. We are willing to come and speak to the other members of your alliance whenever you wish us to come. I hope that you will not think my having seen sixty-seven years in this world puts me beyond the honor of helping you.

I am yours, my lord, whenever you wish to call me.

Compton Belville.

Adelina Burke's was almost the same, unctuous flattery and heaping praises, with the exception of the paragraph at the end.

I understand that you may feel you have no family now, Harry, since families are so valued in our world and you have rejected your last name, but I promise that one awaits you wherever you wish to seek it. Many families would be honored to have a son so powerful and decisive. I offer you the last name of Burke in the spirit of humility, should you ever wish to take it.

Adelina Burke.

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head. He supposed he should have anticipated this, really. There were some wizards who would think he was vulnerable without a blood family at his back—and who wouldn't accept that one brother the same age as himself counted as a blood family. He had magical power, and they would probably think that he had political power, after the way he'd swayed the Wizengamot, though Harry thought that was more just being a vates. He was young enough to make the question of legal guardianship appropriate, if not yet the question of marriage or joining. His parents were most definitely safely out of the way, as safe as they could be without death, and would not challenge the rejection of his surname. And...

Harry sighed. And my current legal guardian is a former Death Eater who was tried for use of an illegal potion within the last year. And he just killed Gilbert Rovenan. Not hard to stir up stories about him, even if they don't dare accuse him outright. And rumors are harder to fight than accusations.

He felt a slight stirring of unease, then, like a prickling of claws up his spine. Should he repair his relationship with Snape, just to show everyone who might come sniffing around him that he was attached to his current guardian enough to reject anyone who tried to substitute for him?

No. When I reconcile with Snape, it has to be genuine. I can't do it just because other wizards and witches can't take a hint. Harry shifted restlessly on the couch and stared at the letters in his hand again. Never mind that I don't intend to take another surname until I'm damn good and ready, since I can afford to be choosy, and maybe not even then. There was something appealing about remaining just "Harry" for the rest of his life, forcing everyone to address him by his name instead of some stupid and contrived title. He was morbidly curious about what was going to happen in his classes, particularly with teachers like McGonagall and Flitwick who liked to be formal with him in public.

In the end, it was easy to decide what to reply to Burke and Belville—a formal acceptance of their new offers of help, along with hints that he could not possibly consider any closer connection, either as an adopted son of the family or an adopted lord, than he had right now, since he was still caught up in the throes of grief from the trial. They would lap it up and respond annoyingly, but it was better than having them sniffing along a trail that might be truly bothersome. Harry sealed the letters with magic and laid them aside; he would have to take a trip up to the Owlery before he went to breakfast.

The next letter was the one the gull had brought. The gull had apparently stayed in the Owlery, screeching and irritating the owls to no end, and now, since it was probably magically linked to the letter, it came sliding in through the door of the Slytherin common room as it opened behind a yawning seventh-year just stumbling in to bed. The seventh-year eyed Harry, and then went on her way, shaking her head and muttering about idiot Lords who didn't get to bed at a decent time. The gull landed on Harry's knee and proceeded to look bright and helpful until Harry shooed it away so he could spread Paton Opalline's letter on his knee and read, whereupon it perched

on the couch and looked bright and helpful for about three seconds, when it pecked him.

Harry shook his head—he thought he could see, now, why Honoria's Animagus form was a gull—and turned his attention to the letter.

Dear Harry:

First of all, my condolences and my congratulations on the trial. I cannot imagine that it comforted you much, if at all, to hear the sentences of your parents, but I will say that it is better than having them free. And your severing of ties with them is probably what will do you the most good, in the end. It will allow you to grow on your own, without the shadow of a poisonous tree looming over you.

Now, to business. I did promise you that the Opalline spy network is yours now, and that my relatives are spread out in many directions, over Europe as well as the British Isles. It is from Europe that my most urgent news comes.

Two of my cousins in Bulgaria report that Durmstrang has gone silent. No owls leave it, and the ones who try to approach it are turned away by what appears to be a lightning ward—a complicated Dark Arts spell that applies more force than necessary, and often kills. Parents who have tried to reach the school to inquire about their children cannot do so. Neither Apparition nor Portkeys work on school grounds, and no child has been seen outside for a week now.

I am not entirely sure of what this means, and neither are my cousins, but they have gathered rumors and passed them along to me in the absence of concrete information. The old Headmaster, Karkaroff, now a known Death Eater, recruited at the school last year. My cousins worry that his trainees may have taken over Durmstrang and are trying to use the other students as hostages or potential fighters for the Dark Lord. I am not entirely sure what I believe myself, but I thought you would wish to know of this as soon as possible.

Harry closed his eyes, imagining what Charles Rosier-Henlin must feel like at the moment. Both his sons attended Durmstrang.

Of course, does he know? Harry opened his eyes and looked at the two letters he had waiting after this one again. No, there was most definitely not a letter from Charles, and Harry couldn't imagine the man not appealing to him for help in a situation like this, even during the trial. If he didn't write his sons often, then he might not know about the silence, and of course an owl took a long time to fly from Britain to Durmstrang...

I'll write him this morning, Harry decided, and turned back to Paton's letter.

The Veela of Southern Europe are considering an alliance with you, two of my aunts living there have reported. However, you should not necessarily depend on them. Unless they are attacked directly—and the Dark Lord has not yet made an overture of either threat or good will to them—the Veela's Council requires a unanimous vote for such an alliance, and they have several hundred members. They will be bogged down in discussion and argument for a long time yet.

There have been several wizards seen approaching giant territory in the last little while. Most of them were killed, two fled, but one has not returned. My brother Gilander fears that this wizard remains in negotiation with the giants, and that he is perhaps a Death Eater. The Dark Lord, as we know from the example of the sirens, has the power to break a species' web, and I doubt that would be good news for any of us.

Several other wizarding communities, particularly in Russia and France, are growing interested in you, Harry. They are accustomed to some wariness regarding British Lords in the last half century, of course; they knew that Voldemort did not intend to restrict his reign to his native land, if once he conquered it. And now that Dumbledore is in prison, and the Dark Lord returned, and a young Lord-level wizard just revealed as the Boy-Who-Lived and the Dark Lord's mortal enemy without Declaring for the Light...their interest is natural, I think.

It is up to you what you wish to do about them. So far, not one of my cousins has reported a strong movement to offer assistance. They are mostly watching, cautious and curious, to see what will happen. Most of my cousins do not think they will join Voldemort; although the

predominance of Light wizards in most international wizarding communities is not as pronounced as it is in Britain, they know what the consequences of serving him are. But they could serve as distractions if you try to dance with them when they insist on remaining neutral. You may be able to offer them profitable alliances, but I am not sure what will tempt them. Let me know if you do wish to initiate discussions with them, and I will pass the message on through my cousins.

Closer to home, several siren attacks have been reported. A school of them swam near the Isle and tried to attack our Muggles, but our wards repelled them. Two people have drowned in the Loch Ness in the last week, and the local wizards do not think it the work of their kelpie. There have also been several isolated deaths along the coastlines of both Britain and Ireland—easily attributable to carelessness in the water, but bearing the marks of siren attack.

Harry closed his eyes, feeling dizzy. He wondered if the sirens had broken free of Voldemort, or remained under his reign and were attacking on his orders. The pattern of random attacks might fit the attacks on the equinox, when Voldemort had simply wanted to take Muggles, without seeming to care about whom he captured.

He shook his head, opened his eyes, and went on reading.

Several of my British cousins, who have studied to relearn what they could of place and green magic, have reported unusual weather patterns in the places they have bound themselves to. Storms all over the Isles are growing fiercer. It has rained nonstop at my aunt Mawde's home for the past five days, breaking through all her weather wards. She is not sure what this means, but she has gathered the report and sent it along with the others.

Harry frowned slightly. I did think that for the same storm to extend from London to Scotland on Friday was unusual. It hadn't rained at Hogwarts on Saturday, but he did remember something about rain on Sunday, now that he thought of it, though he'd been too deeply involved in conversation with Draco to look outside.

He returned to Paton's letter.

My family has contacts among the London werewolves, and reports them agitated, for two reasons. One: the Ministry is apparently preparing to push tougher anti-werewolf laws, including one that would require all lycanthropes to spend the nights of the full moon in Ministry custody, perhaps in Tullianum. Second: there are rumors of you as vates spreading, and the werewolves disagree on what they should do about it. Their animal sides have no love of you as many other species seem to do.

This is the most important news my family has gathered. In return, I have a personal request to make. I invite you to join my family on the Isle for New Year's. I am aware that you will most likely spend Christmas in the care of your own loved ones, but I would like you to enjoy one celebration with the Opallines, and other than Christmas, this is the closest holiday.

That is not the only reason, of course. Calibrid, my daughter and heir, would like to meet you. Circumstances forbade her from attending the trial; she spent the past year traveling to learn the politics and customs of Europe, and now must remain bound to the Isle for a year to renew her acquaintance with it. As well, my son Doncan, similarly bound, looks forward to meeting with you. I think you will like him.

Please write back soon. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours in the grace of the Light,

Paton Opalline.

Harry leaned back on the couch and stared at the ceiling for a moment, thinking. One thing was clear: There was no way that he could handle all this by himself, as much as he would have liked to.

He closed his eyes and drew up a parchment in his mind, carefully placing concerns on it.

It doesn't sound like I can do anything about the Veela as yet. Same thing with the storms, except keep an eye on them, and ask Paton to report anything else unusual about them to me. I don't have any idea

about weather magic, and Merlin knows what would happen if I asked Trelawney to read the patterns to me.

The giants...damn. Send someone to negotiate with them? Who? Hagrid? I don't know if I have the right to ask that of him. Harry gnawed his lip, then decided, I don't have the right, no, but I can ask him, and see what he says about it.

The werewolves are a problem, especially since the only contact I might have among them is Wilmot, and I think a letter from me to him would probably raise a few eyebrows. I remember Remus mentioning that he knows some of them, though, a long time ago. I'll ask him if he'll serve as my delegate.

I have got to get in contact with whatever the closest wizarding community is to Durmstrang. I'll write to Charles, and I'll ask Paton to put me in touch with whichever one of his cousins can most help me there. For the others, I'll wait until they actually approach me. And if they're just interested in watching, I'll make sure I put on a bloody good show. Harry could feel himself grin briefly.

Now, the sirens. Stupid things. It does seem random so far, and I don't know how to predict where they'll strike next. Siren schools are the next subject of study for me, then. And I'll write Arabella Zabini. If anyone knows a way of counteracting musical threats, then she will.

Harry sat up, and began writing. He detailed all his decisions in his letter to Paton, including his decision to accept their New Year's invitation. The moment he finished and sealed that letter, the gull snatched it in its beak, gave a bright, piping cry, and flew towards the door of the Slytherin common room, again just as it opened to let someone else out to breakfast. Harry shook his head. They must have a magic of their own.

His letters to Charles and Arabella followed. Harry didn't see a way or a reason to dance around the problems delicately, so he told them the blunt truth. He was hungry by the time he finished writing, but he still had two more letters that had arrived during the weekend left. He reached for them gamely.

The first was, luckily, only a short note from Lucius.

Dear Harry:

Please be advised that the Dark Lord has a new Death Eater. Her name is Indigena Yaxley, of a family that values honor more than sense, and who is now serving because her nephew served my old Lord and betrayed him. She is incredibly good with plants, a powerful Dark witch, very clever, and determined to be neutral in the War until this occurred. Think of her as a sane and more dangerous Bellatrix. This means that you must be even more on your guard when you go to face our common enemy. Do not, I repeat do not, trust anyone you do not know who approaches you with an offer of alliance. We know that Indigena can disguise herself well enough to fool most wizards, though not how or what she looks like in the disguise.

We will have to find something else to call the Alliance, now that you have rejected your last name. Do think on it.

Lucius Malfoy.

Harry rolled his eyes, but penned a short note back, to say that he'd received the warning and was grateful for it. He remembered studying the family Yaxley, though not in depth; they hadn't participated in any wars of Dark and Light for nearly a century, preferring to stay in seclusion and study the Dark Arts. *Vita desinit, decus permanet*, ran their motto. Poetically translated, it meant Life ends, honor does not.

Harry could see why Indigena Yaxley would be a problem.

The last letter was from Augustus Starrise, a diplomatically worded note that suggested informing his fellow alliance members of his new allegiance as soon as possible. Harry had to agree with that. He didn't have the time or energy to write any more letters right now, though. His head was spinning with complications, and he had five letters to post.

He scooped up those five, and made for the Owlery, running over possible wordings for his appeals to Remus and Hagrid in his head. Remus would normally be happy to help him, he knew, but the

secrets of his fellow werewolves weren't ones he had willingly revealed to Harry so far. And Harry had never had the close friendship with Hagrid that Connor had enjoyed.

More to the point, I'm not Dumbledore. And Hagrid had been loyal to Dumbledore.

Harry rubbed distractedly at his head, stopping only as he heard the crinkle of parchment and realized he would crush his post if the rubbing continued. Sometimes I wish I had never gone into politics, he thought, and decided to ignore all the factors in his life that would have made politics go after him.

Harry was so involved in plotting what he was going to do about Durmstrang—not only the Rosier-Henlin children were there, but Gregory Goyle, assuming that the rumors last year were true and his father had sent him to Durmstrang instead of letting him come back to Hogwarts—that he didn't notice the stares at first. Therefore, it was disconcerting to look up and find himself the focus of most of the eyes in the Great Hall.

Harry returned their gazes for a moment, then snorted. Of course. Most of them haven't seen me since the trial, with the way I buried myself away this weekend. This is the first public appearance I've made as the Boy-Who-Lived and Renounced His Name and Got His Parents Put In Prison.

He took his seat at the Slytherin table, ignoring the stares as best he could. It wasn't as though he didn't have other things to worry about. Among the other things, he'd discovered a storm raging when he went up to the Owlery, blasting, lashing rain descending on the stones so hard that Harry was reluctant to send the birds out until they hooted their readiness to fly at him. Such a storm wouldn't have made him do anything other than blink normally, but with storms all over the British Isles...

Could Voldemort be altering the weather patterns? I have no idea why, though. It would make it more inconvenient for his Death Eaters than anyone else, since they're the ones who have to meet outdoors more often.

Or perhaps the storms were actually incidental. Harry was sure he had read something once before about the weather changing as a result of powerful magic. But the magic would have to be so powerful that only a Lord could raise it.

He reached automatically for porridge, and a hand covered his. He glanced at Draco and raised his eyebrows.

“Have you forgotten the talk we had yesterday?” Draco asked.

Harry frowned. He had, actually. He’d told Draco most of what Vera had said, and Draco had insisted that he try sweeter and more savory things than porridge to, as Draco put it, “recover his sense of taste.”

Harry still thought the whole thing immensely silly, the silliest of Vera’s prescriptions to him. Yes, he could see the necessity of learning to accept himself as human; after the much-improved conversations he’d had with Draco on Saturday and Sunday, he was impatient to push himself some more on it. And yes, he could see the necessity of relearning the pleasures of touch and sleep. But why should caring about what he ate make such a difference?

He had made the mistake of telling Draco about it, though, so under his stern eyes, he was forced to load his plate with eggs, sausages, and a roll. Draco just barely approved the pumpkin juice, saying that he thought orange juice would be better, and refused to let Harry have any corn flakes.

“I don’t need this level of fussing,” Harry said under his breath as he took a bite of his eggs. He chewed them, then shrugged at Draco’s stare. He didn’t dislike them, exactly, but they had texture and salt, and that made him feel uncomfortable. He didn’t see why he couldn’t have porridge.

“Sometimes, you do,” said Draco softly.

“You’re not my mum,” Harry pointed out. “Or my brother.”

"I would say that I'm definitely not either of those things," said Draco, his eyes brightening, and Harry realized he shouldn't have given him the opening. "Considering what we were doing yesterday, I would be most disturbed to wake up and find myself related to you in any way."

Harry flushed and returned to his breakfast. If it would get Draco to stop reminding him of things better kept in private, then he'd eat the damn eggs.

"Potter."

Harry deliberately didn't turn around. The person behind him coughed and leaned forward to say, "Potter!" right into his ear.

"That's not my name anymore, Smith," Harry pointed out absently, biting into a sausage. He winced at the flavor. "Besides, since when are we on such formal terms? We're allies, I'd thought."

That was perhaps the only time that Harry remembered being able to render Zacharias Smith speechless. It didn't last very long. Zacharias coughed and tried again a moment later. "Harry," he said, and Harry was glad to put his fork down and turn around.

"Yes?"

Zacharias stood up haughtily straight, looking as if he refrained from rolling his eyes only because it was something no Smith would do. "I just want to ask you a few questions about what this means," he said, tapping the Daily Prophet article that Harry refused to look at.

"All right," Harry agreed.

"You're not the heir of your family?" Zacharias stared straight into his eyes.

"No." Harry rolled his head back on his neck and smiled at him. "Does that disappoint you?"

"A bit," Zacharias said. "You're elder son, correct? I thought the Potter inheritance would pass to you, with your father in his—current

condition.” Harry wondered if Light pureblood manners forbade referring to the loss of someone’s magic. It wasn’t a custom he’d ever heard of.

“I renounced my name before then,” said Harry quietly. “It went to my brother because it had nowhere else to go.”

“Ah.” Zacharias hesitated a moment, as though he now regretted doing this in the middle of the Great Hall. Harry didn’t. It would answer some questions so he wouldn’t have to answer them multiple times over, and it kept him from having to eat. Draco couldn’t complain, and had better not poke him with the fork that Harry could see him picking up from the corner of his eye.

Zacharias recovered himself, though, and said, with a smooth, cold, stern face, “What family name do you plan to adopt?”

Definitely glad that we did this here. Harry raised his voice for his answer. “I’m Harry for right now, and that’s all I want to be. I’ll never renounce my kinship with my brother, who’s keeping his name, but I’m not accepting the Potter name again. Nor do I have any plans for adoption into any family, currently. And I like it that way.” A slow turn of his head had him meeting multiple speculative eyes, and he sighed. I suppose that won’t stop all the offers. Each of them is going to think they’re the family that can persuade me otherwise, and they’ll think me vulnerable without relatives until they tangle with me. At least it might be on the level of words, as this confrontation is, and not shouted hexes, which ought to improve my relationship with Ravenclaw.

“You don’t know how glad we would be to take you,” said Draco, quietly enough that Zacharias probably didn’t even hear.

Harry turned his head and gripped his hand. “I know,” he said quietly. “But I want to be just Harry right now.”

Draco didn’t answer, but squeezed his hand back, some of the sulky look fading from his face. And he put down the fork.

Zacharias seemed to be suitably impressed with this show of strength. He nodded. "Then I'll simply reswear my alliance to Harry the vates instead of Harry Potter," he said. "Will that be acceptable?"

"It will," said Harry, and his erstwhile ally left him. Harry hopefully cast a Tempus charm to check the minutes left in breakfast, and brightened when he saw there were only five minutes left before they had to leave anyway. He started to stand.

Draco clamped a hand on his arm. "Sit down," he breathed. "You didn't get enough to eat."

"I had all I want," said Harry.

Draco looked into his eyes, obviously asking him if he really wanted to have an argument this stupid in front of everyone.

Harry resignedly sat down and ate a few more sausages to make Draco happy, trying to ignore Millicent's snickering. "Remus?"

Remus looked up, surprised. He had thought that Harry had Charms at this hour. "Is everything all right, Harry?" he asked, setting down the letter from Wilmot he'd been looking at. Wilmot had bragged about revealing himself to Harry. Remus wasn't sure that was the wisest thing to do—not because Harry would betray a secret like that, but because it might put Harry in an awkward position with the Minister. The situation was giving him a headache, and he was happy to focus on another problem. At least Harry didn't smell particularly distressed.

Harry grinned at him and leaned against the door. "Sure, Remus. But I can already do the Silencing Charms we're covering perfectly well, after all. And Professor Flitwick doesn't know what to call me. He finally settled on Mr. Harry, but he still doesn't like it." Harry chuckled. "So he said I could come see you."

Remus lifted his eyebrows. "And what do you need to see me about?"

Harry pulled a letter out of his pocket and levitated it over to him. Remus accepted it without thought, then shook his head a bit. Sometimes he found himself forgetting that Harry had ever had two hands, so well did he compensate with his magic. It was—well, disturbing. Remus wasn't sure why it should be disturbing, though, so he focused on the letter, blinking as a certain paragraph flashed green. Remus's eyes caught the words London werewolves, and he leaned close.

"I know about Wilmot," said Harry quietly as he read. "He revealed himself to me during the trial. And he said that he had contacts among the London werewolves. I'm afraid that owling him might reveal him, though. My post is going to be tracked if at all possible, and a random Auror writing me would set off bells I don't want ringing. Would you be willing to talk to the London werewolves for me?"

Remus took his time to raise his head. Old loyalties were tugging him in two directions now. At least he'd been to the Sanctuary, and was sure that he could handle the conflict now. In the old days, this might have tugged him apart.

On the one hand, Harry was the only member of his family, besides Connor, for whom Remus had any love left now. And he'd known Harry since he was a child, and he knew him now as vates. He couldn't see Harry doing something that would hurt the refugee packs on purpose.

On the other hand, some of the London refugees had specifically requested that no human know about them. They kept an eye on dealings in the wizarding and Muggle worlds that might affect them, of course, but as quietly as possible, mostly through werewolves like Remus who hadn't joined a pack. Even a vates wouldn't be welcome among them without a wolf snarling in his head. And they had helped Remus during the summers when he was a student in Hogwarts, and during the years between the time he left Hogwarts and the first fall of Voldemort, and again during the time before Connor and Harry came to school, giving him money, shelter, protection, when he couldn't hold a job. Betrayal would be a poor return for all they had done for him.

“What do you want me to say?” Remus asked, deciding to temporize. Harry, at least, unlike some humans, would understand if Remus refused to do this.

“That I’m going to try as hard as I can to make sure those anti-werewolf laws aren’t passed.” Harry’s eyes flashed. For a moment, Remus was carried painfully back in time to his sixth year, when Lily’s eyes had flashed like that at James. Then it was past, and he was looking at a boy more determined than Lily had ever been about anything. “It’s time Scrimgeour and I talked about that. And that if someone wants Wolfsbane, they can approach me through you or Hawthorn or one of the Light werewolves I can safely communicate with. Delilah Gloryflower would probably be best, since her aunt is my ally, too.”

Remus leaned back in his chair. “You’d just provide the Wolfsbane for free?”

Harry frowned at him. “Of course.”

Remus pondered for a moment, then decided he had to reveal this, or some of his words wouldn’t make any sense to Harry. “Some of them would actually prefer if you charged for it, Harry. Without a price, they’re likely to think it’s poison, or a trap.”

Harry nodded slowly. “I can see that. But then some who need it might not get it.”

Remus smiled in spite of himself. “Worry about the ones willing to approach you, first,” he said.

“Then you’ll pass the message along?” Harry’s eyes widened, and he smiled brilliantly when Remus nodded. “Thank you. That’s really all that I wanted them to know. If they want to tell me anything, I’d appreciate it, but it’s up to them.”

Did his training make him a diplomat, or did he just turn out that way? Remus asked himself, as he watched Harry slip out the door. This open-ended approach was the one that would work best with the London packs, many of whom were as wary of wizards as true

wolves were of Muggles. It'd take a lot of circling and sniffing even so before they could bring themselves to trust Harry—well, except with Loki's pack, but Loki was something like a Weasley twin, and Remus wouldn't trust the immediate offer he would be sure to make.

And there was the chance, however small and distant and far in the future it might be, that this would someday lead to freedom from their wolves.

Remus's wolf snarled in his head, demanding blood. Remus grinned fiercely to spite it, and then rose to begin writing his letters.

Harry peered out a window on the fifth floor at the steadily falling rain, and felt his shoulders relax, despite the storm's unnaturalness. The day had gone well so far. No one had been stupid enough to approach him with offers of adoption—yet—Remus had agreed to contact the London werewolves, Hagrid had hesitated but said he'd think about talking to the giants, Draco had been satisfied with the sandwiches Harry had eaten at lunch, and Harry had finished writing the letters that would inform his allies of Augustus Starrise's new place among them. He couldn't help grinning as he imagined Lucius's reaction. Yes, Draco's father probably knew about Augustus already, but assuming he didn't...

"Harry. There you are."

Harry jumped, turning around as he did so. Acies Lestrangle stood behind him, her hood over her face as it usually was outside class. Harry relaxed and inclined his head. "Professor Merryweather," he said, just in case someone was around to overhear them. "Did you need something?"

"I need to tell you something," said Acies. "I have known about it for several months, but you were not yet ready to hear it. Other songs have ridden your mind. Now you may hear this prophecy's music."

Harry felt his shoulders tense, most of his good mood vanishing. Not another fucking prophecy. "I suppose there's no chance that it doesn't concern me?" he asked.

Acies gave him just enough of a look from under her cloak to intimidate him, then began to half-sing, half-chant.

“Three on three the old one coils,
Three in its times, three in its choices,
It bears his rivals to silence and stillness,
And the wild Darkness laughs, and the Light rejoices.

“Two on two the storms that are coming,
Two for the day, and two for the year,
The storm of darkness when no moon will shine,
And the storm of light that will blaze most fiercely here.

“One on one all the prophecies bear down,
One is their center, and one is their heart,
And from my mouth comes no Divination again
Except those prophecies in which he has a part.”

Harry blinked, his mind emptying for a moment, the way that it had when he finally heard the full prophecy that concerned him and Connor for the first time. Then he found his eyes turning to the rain outside the window first. It showed absolutely no signs of stopping, and the thunder screamed like something with its guts ripped out to make the point.

“Two on two the storms that are coming,” he whispered.

“Yes.” Acies moved up beside him, one hand touching his shoulder. Harry blinked and glanced at it. It was an ordinary hand, but for a moment, it had felt incredibly heavy, weighted and scaled, a dragon’s talon. “I think these storms the prelude of them, though, rather than the storms that the prophecy means. But there is something I fear, something I fear very much. Did you know, vates, that on the night of the midwinter solstice, the moon will be dark?”

Harry closed his eyes. Shit. That’s a prime day for one of Voldemort’s attacks, and if the moon is dark and all influence of Light is banished... He didn’t know for certain what Voldemort might do, but something strong enough to influence a prophecy wouldn’t be pleasant.

“Thank you, Acies,” he said. Then his mind leaped again, reciting the eighth line of the prophecy to him, and his eyes flared open. “And the storm of light is coming to Hogwarts?”

“So the prophecy says,” said Acies calmly, stepping away from him. “Sybill Trelawney stood on the Astronomy Tower when she made it, and it sounds like a local reference, does it not?”

Harry nodded, his mind spinning rapidly, investigating several conclusions and disregarding most of them, pinpointing the one most likely.

A storm of darkness on Midwinter. A storm of light on Midsummer. And on Midsummer, it'll be a year since Voldemort's resurrection.

He took a deep breath, and expelled it again. A ringing had appeared in his head, but he didn't think it was anything to worry about. This was the kind of ringing that he usually got just before he confronted a worthy opponent, or did something that mattered to the war he'd been training for all his life.

“Thank you, Acies,” he said, starting to move away, but paused when she remained where she was, staring out the window. “Are you well?” he asked gently.

“I hear the music,” Acies whispered. “Dragons are called the Singers, I have told you that.”

Harry nodded.

Acies turned her head to look at him, though again it was only a quick flash of wild eyes before she slid her hood back over her face. “I am still mostly human, Harry,” she said. “But only mostly. The dragon in me hears the music and sings back to it. And every time I use the dragon, I yield more of the human. If I am ever close enough to the great songs, however, the songs of Dark and Light, I fear that I will not be able to help myself, and my dragon will come.”

Harry hesitated, unsure what to say. Acies was staring out the window at the rain again.

"Is there anything I can do?" Harry asked at last. "As vates, I mean?"

"You cannot free me from freedom," Acies said gently. "Be on your way, Harry, and be well. Only remember me as human, when there is nothing human left of me."

Harry bowed his head, feeling no fear, only sadness and a great awe, and left her there, staring as the rain continued to fall and the thunder screamed its anger and its death.

Chapter Forty-Nine: Ariadne's Web

Harry woke at a note of phoenix song. He sat up, pushing his hand sleepily at his eyes, trying to wake up faster than seemed to be happening. If Fawkes sang to him in the middle of the night, and not to put him to sleep, then it must be serious.

But the song wasn't coming from Fawkes, he found when he opened his eyes fully and saw the phoenix sitting on the far end of his bed. It soared from just above his left wrist, and a moment later Charles Rosier-Henlin's voice said, "Harry? Can you hear me?"

Harry bowed his head and suppressed a groan. Of course. The spell Charles had taught him to communicate over long distances, the spell that he and his allies had used in the Woodhouse attack! He could have used this to speak with Charles right away about Durmstrang, if only he had remembered it.

"Sir," he said. "What can I help you with?"

There was a pause, as if that wasn't the greeting Charles had expected, but he went on with no discernible change of tone. "I assume that you know about Durmstrang now."

"Yes, but almost nothing about it," said Harry honestly. It was the reason why he hadn't felt able to do anything about the other school as yet. A few subtle questions among students who had relatives at Durmstrang had produced shaking heads and blank looks. Harry couldn't plan an attack when he had no information.

"You could have spoken to me."

Harry felt his face burn. "Yes," he said. "I'm sorry. I forgot."

"Did you also forget that I use this spell to communicate with my sons?" Charles asked. "I know what has been happening inside Durmstrang."

"I did forget, but I would be grateful if you would tell me," said Harry, his mind springing into action. "What can I do? Is there a way of

bringing down the lightning ward that they have the school surrounded with, or—“

“The answer, Harry, is nothing. We can do nothing. Right now.”

The bitterness silenced Harry. He waited a moment until he was sure that nothing else would emerge from the air above his wrist, and then he asked cautiously, “Why? Is Voldemort Marking the students as Death Eaters?”

“That abomination, at least, is beyond his reach, unless he changes the magic of the Dark Mark,” said Charles. “He cannot take anyone unwilling. It was a protection he devised during the First War so that he would know who was loyal to him. He didn’t think that someone would turn traitor to him after they had the Mark, or take it for any other reason than serving him.” His voice was vicious with satisfaction, before it went back to the dry tone that Harry thought meant he was extremely angry. “No, he is holding the children as hostages. I have received a polite little letter, informing me that I will not fight beside you anymore. Or else. Mr. Rhangnara has received a similar letter.”

Harry’s head was light, spinning. This happened, and I wasn’t able to prevent it. This happened, and I let it happen. He crushed the guilt, because it would have prevented him from speaking. “I didn’t know that Mr. Rhangnara’s children were at Durmstrang,” he said instead. He had assumed without thinking that they were schooled privately, since Thomas was obviously a wizard interested in books and learning.

“They are,” said Charles. “And his daughter Charis has taken the Crucio—“ There was a sudden silence, as if he hadn’t meant to tell Harry that. He probably hadn’t, Harry thought.

“How old is Charis?” Harry asked.

“Harry, I do not see—“

“How old?” Harry stared at the far wall. He could always speak to Thomas with this spell and ask him. He probably couldn’t owl him,

since Voldemort would be watching for some sign of communication between Harry and the allies who were being pressured to withdraw from him. And what had the owl to Charles yesterday cost his sons?

“Twelve,” said Charles. “She is twelve.”

Harry closed his eyes.

“And my son Owen took it, and he is sixteen,” Charles went on, in a harsh rush, as if determined to get all the bad news out of the way at once. “Voldemort sent in Bellatrix Lestrange, Harry.”

“Is he mad?” Harry murmured, then realized he knew the answer to that question. He changed it. “Does he really think that she’ll be able to control her urge to curse all the children in sight?”

“Apparently so,” said Charles, once again dryly. “Or perhaps not. Considering the spell he has used on the school, absolute loyalty may mean more to him than the actual good condition of the hostages.”

“You still haven’t told me what that spell is,” Harry said, opening his eyes and frowning at nothing. “Or why it’s impossible for me to go to Durmstrang with you and rip that lightning ward apart.”

“Have you ever heard of Ariadne’s Web?”

“I know who Ariadne was, of course,” said Harry. “She let Theseus into the center of the Labyrinth to kill the Minotaur by giving him a clew of thread that would show him the way in and then the way out. But perhaps we’re not speaking of the same one—“

“We are. Ariadne’s Web is, according to wizarding legend, what Ariadne did to Theseus and all those in his palace after he deserted her. It binds everyone in a particular enclosed place from using magic against the caster. It’s a strange spell. The web is absolutely impossible to break from inside it—there is no way that the students could take on Lestrange and win, no matter how many of them tried. But from the outside, in this case Durmstrang’s walls, it seems to be

linked to a single object that the caster carries. If we could make her put that object down, then we would have a chance of fighting her.”

“Thus the lightning ward,” Harry summarized. “But, sir, I do have the power to break a ward like that, and I am vates. Destroying webs is what I do.” The very thought of Ariadne’s Web was making him sick with the need to destroy it. “We could still go to Durmstrang and—“

“There exists another effect of Ariadne’s Web,” said Charles quietly. “The caster can will anyone in it to suffer pain or to die instantly. There is no stopping that, from either inside or outside, unless the web itself is broken. Lestrage has announced to the children that the minute she feels the wards fall, she will begin lashing out through the web, hurting anyone in sight.”

Harry closed his eyes. “And certainly my allies’ children would be among her first targets,” he muttered.

“Precisely.”

“So what can we do?” Harry whispered. He felt helpless—not necessarily against what had happened, but against the extent of Voldemort’s cruelty. He had not thought to guard against a spell like this because he had not dreamed that it existed, much less that Voldemort would use it.

“Portkeys and Apparition no longer work onto school grounds,” said Charles. “And the Floo Network to Durmstrang has been sealed off. But a Portkey into the school itself would work, to get us around the wards without having to drop them. They are, of course, only available to someone trusted. That means—“

“A Death Eater,” Harry finished. “We need a Death Eater.”

“Yes. I don’t suppose you know one?” Charles’s voice got dryer.

Harry’s mind went at once to Evan Rosier, but he had to say, “No. Not one that I could trust to give me accurate information, or a Portkey that actually worked to take us to Durmstrang.”

"I thought not. I am working, subtly, on contacts that I had in the First War, when I gave the Dark Lord monetary support. It will be a long, slow process, to get through to people who can help me disrupt his plans so thoroughly as this, and to convince them to take the risk in the first place. In the meantime, I've told my boys to keep their heads down, and avoid Lestrangle's notice as much as possible. Rhangnara has passed the same message along to his children."

"And there is nothing else that can be done?" There has to be, Harry thought, but he realized that was probably his experience as vates talking. From the time he had learned of a web until the time he broke it, he had never encountered one he thought could not be broken—only the consequences of what might happen if he unraveled it too early. The idea that he would have to wait in silence and patience while people who had trusted their lives to him suffered was intolerable.

"Nothing, Harry," said Charles quietly. "I am sorry. I have spoken with my sons exhaustively. The spell is undoubtedly Ariadne's Web, and I have been through both my library and Rhangnara's, which is much more extensive. The web cannot be broken from the inside, and they have restricted all access thoroughly from the outside."

"I am sorry," Harry whispered. "So sorry, that following me has brought you into this." He shuddered at the thought of living in the same school with Bellatrix, never knowing when she might make you suffer pain or even death, instantaneously and at her whim.

"I knew something like this might happen," said Charles, sounding calmer than he had so far. "But they still should not have touched my children, and for that they will suffer." His voice was like dry ice. "I will not owl you, and neither will Mr. Rhangnara, now. We must be seen complying with the terms that the Dark Lord has dictated to us. But we will use this spell to speak to you, and if we find some other method to get around the Web and into the school, we will let you know at once."

"I don't suppose brooms would—"

“No. The lightning ward has the school surrounded, Mr. Pot—Harry. You would still have to try and drop the ward as you rode above Durmstrang, and Lestrangle would know at once.”

Harry gave a little snarl. He hated feeling helpless. But until he could think of a better solution, this one would have to do. Perhaps he could send an owl to Rosier, though he hadn't heard from the man in long enough for the silence to make him wary.

“Very well,” he murmured. “Thank you for telling me.”

“You are welcome.”

Charles's voice ceased, and Harry was left to sit on his bed, in the dark. There was no chance of going back to sleep—and, he decided abruptly, he didn't want to sit on his bed in the dark either. He opened his curtains and peered cautiously at the other boys' beds. The sound of Draco's light snores came from beside him, accompanied by Blaise's slightly deeper ones, and Harry nodded. Though neither of them slept anything like as heavily as Connor, they were still in the phase of sleep where they were least likely to hear him if he crept out.

He wasn't sure where he was going as he went down the stairs and crossed the common room velvet-footed. Going outside the school to fly would be too dangerous. He only knew that he wanted to do something, since he couldn't do what he really wanted: fly to Durmstrang, take down the ward, and rescue everyone.

He stepped out into the dungeons, shut the door to the common room behind him, and leaned his head against the cool stone. He thought he could hear the sound of rushing water if he listened intently enough. That might only be in his head, but it comforted him nonetheless. He didn't know how long he stood there, letting his hand stroke the stone and trying to think of nothing at all.

“Harry. Is there a reason that you are filling your hair with slime and your palm with blood?”

Harry started and looked up. Snape stood not far behind him, his wand held out in front of him with a faint Lumos on the end of it and

his eyebrows raised. Harry glanced down then, as a stinging pain in his hand made itself known, and realized that he'd ground his palm so hard into the stone that it had a gash on it. He grimaced.

"I had bad news," he said softly, then could have struck himself. He didn't want to talk about this with Snape.

Snape studied him intently, then said, "Come with me, Harry. We will not disturb Madam Pomfrey this time of night."

Harry knew he could have argued, could have resisted, but he really didn't want to go back to bed, the only other possible option. Anyone's company was to be preferred to his own right about then. He followed Snape to his private rooms—which slightly surprised Harry; he had thought they'd go to his offices—and took his seat on the couch near the fire. Snape ducked briefly towards the shelf along the wall where he kept his personal potions, then came back with two of them. Harry accepted one that smelled of a normal healing draught, but shook his head at the other. "I don't need to be calm," he said.

"Don't you?"

Harry squinted at Snape. He didn't sound the way he—well, should have sounded. He sounded interested, and as if he thought there was at least a reasonable chance that Harry might not need the Calming Draught. Harry would have expected Snape to force it down his throat, instead.

And that made Harry hesitate. It's my choice. He eyed the blue liquid, then sighed. Do I have a chance of getting back to sleep if I don't take this? No. Do I need the sleep? Yes.

He drank down the vial, and was briefly gratified to see Snape's eyes widen before the potion spread serenity across the surface of his mind. He sighed again and gave Snape back the empty vials, then leaned back and closed his eyes. The pain in his palm had already stopped, and Harry knew the wound would have closed.

"Do you wish to speak about what is troubling you?"

Snape's voice was low and careful. Harry listened, his senses sharpened now that he didn't have to worry about emotions clouding them, and found no trace of impatience. Snape wasn't trying to force him to do this any more than he had been trying to force him to take the Calming Draught. It was—unexpected.

And, given his free choice, Harry decided to answer. "It's Durmstrang," he murmured. "Charles just spoke to me and told me that I can't do anything about it. Bellatrix Lestrange is in the school, with Ariadne's Web on the children, and a ward around her that she'll know the instant I try to take down. Then she can hurt or kill the people I'm trying to save." He felt a wave of tension run through his muscles, despite the Calming Draught. "Why? Why can't I do anything?"

"Should you have been able to do something?" Snape asked.

Harry opened his eyes. "Of course I should have. What kind of question is that?"

"Why?"

"Because it's a strange question for you to ask, that's why."

He thought Snape smiled. "I did not mean what was strange about my question. I meant, why should you have been able to do something?"

"Oh." Harry frowned. "Because I'm the only wizard who stands a chance of matching Voldemort in power, now—unless we really want to free Dumbledore and ask him to pretty please help us." He snorted. "I should be able to do something about the ward and the Ariadne's Web."

"And did you know that the Dark Lord was going to do this?"

"No," said Harry reluctantly. He frowned at Snape. "You're going to make me see sense or something, aren't you?"

"If I can." Snape's face was neutral. "You seem to be feeling helpless, Harry, but there is no reason for that. You did not cause this."

"But I should have anticipated it." Harry moved restlessly; he couldn't tell if the Calming Draught was wearing off or if his emotions were simply too strong for the potion to contain them all. "I would have known immediately if I hadn't been paying so much attention to my own affairs, the trial. And then that weekend where I didn't look at letters! Paton's letter telling me about Durmstrang's silence came on Saturday. If I'd looked at it—"

"You would have known about your own helplessness earlier," Snape finished. "That is all."

"Maybe I could think of something," said Harry. "There has to be some way to get through the ward and the web."

"Sometimes, Harry, there is not," said Snape softly.

Harry frowned at him. "But you've always found a way. You've never been helpless in your life. It's one of the things I admire about you, you know." Something very odd flickered across Snape's face, but Harry didn't think he could identify it, so he didn't try. "You found a way out of just being a Death Eater, and you found a way out of serving Dumbledore when you saw he wasn't worth serving, and you found a way to rescue me when you shouldn't have been able to. You even found a way to get my parents punished." This time, he couldn't help the slight accusing tone to his voice. "When you should have just left things alone."

"Harry," said Snape, voice low, intense. "I was helpless in most of those situations, and took the only road open to me."

"But that's just the thing," said Harry, flinging up his hand. "There's no road open in this situation that I can see."

"And there was no road open in the situation with your parents that did not cost me something I held dear," said Snape. "Please understand that, Harry. I did not accuse them to hurt you. I did not

accuse them to hurt James. The cost of accusing them was your good opinion of me. The cost of leaving them free was your soul.”

“It wouldn’t have been,” Harry muttered, closing his eyes.

“It would,” said Snape. “You would have driven yourself to death trying to rescue them, and it was impossible to rescue them. You saw that yourself at the trial.” Abruptly, he drew in his breath, and was still. Then he murmured, “You must weigh the costs of acting against not acting at this juncture. What are the costs of not acting?”

“Lives, potentially,” Harry whispered. “My own peace. The feeling that I’ve failed my allies.”

“And if you act?”

“Lives, potentially,” Harry had to answer again. “My allies’ good opinion of me. The feeling that I’ve endangered the children at Durmstrang through my own actions, instead of just letting something happen to them.”

“So it all swings on your own feelings,” Snape said. “And are your own emotions enough reason to do something difficult and dangerous, something that might endanger the children inside Durmstrang because of you?”

Harry made a small sound of distress. He didn’t think he could open his eyes. The Calming Draught was drowning his mind deep. But if he didn’t deal with the problem now, then it would just overwhelm him when he woke up. “No,” he whispered. “They can’t be. They aren’t. I just—I just wish there was something I could do.”

“Research Ariadne’s Web,” said Snape. “Research wards. If you find something that might mean nothing to anyone else, something only possible for a wizard of your power, then you can launch yourself at it. Until then, there really is nothing else that you can do.”

“Maybe not,” said Harry. He felt himself lying back on the couch. Snape was beside him in a moment, with a soft swish of robes, arranging him so that he lay back and removing his glasses. Harry

managed to peer at him blearily, though he didn't think he could focus his eyes. "Did you really do it because of that?"

Snape looked down at him. "Because of what?"

"You didn't accuse my parents because you hated James," Harry clarified. "You did it to save me."

Snape stiffened in surprise. Then he said, after a moment as full of life as a heartbeat, "Yes, I did."

"Oh." Harry closed his eyes. "Wasn't sure about that," he muttered. He felt a hand smooth over his forehead, lingering on his scar, but sleep was already claiming him, full of dreams that wouldn't eat him alive.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry knew it was probably childish, but he kept his head bowed over his book. Ariadne's Web is sometimes considered to be a myth, the text told him, but it is most assuredly a real spell. There are myths about it that have hindered researchers into it for centuries, however. The most persistent of these is the idea that it can be cast only by a woman, as it was a witch's vengeance on a man who forsook her. This is not true, though it is true that the web is stronger when cast by a witch...

"Mr. Potter. Please."

The speaker had stepped around in front of him. Harry was vaguely surprised to see that it was a stranger—a rabbit wizard with what seemed to be a permanently apologetic look on his face, clutching a small sheaf of papers. He held out a hand when he saw Harry's stare, flushing.

"My name is Adam Proudfoot," he murmured. "I was Mr. Potter's—that is to say, your father's solicitor. I've come to see you and your brother about the settlement of the properties and the Potter inheritance."

Harry didn't take his hand. "Then you want to talk to my brother," he said, turning back to his book. "He's the one who inherited everything."

"Harry."

Harry looked over his shoulder reluctantly. Connor stood in the library entrance, frowning at him, and ignoring Madam Pince, who was giving them a glare of death for interrupting the silence.

"There are things we need to discuss," said Connor. "I want to make sure that you have some of the money, for example—"

"And I don't want it," Harry cut in.

"Mr. Potter—" twittered Mr. Proudfoot, who obviously didn't get it.

"Brother." Connor took a single step forward, his gaze stronger than Harry had seen it since that day in the courtroom. "I'll need an heir, and I don't have a chance of having one for a while yet. And I know things about the Potter properties that you don't. They want an heir. They want to know that they'll have somewhere to go if I die."

"They can talk to you?" Harry asked, startled. That wasn't something he'd heard about Lux Aeterna or the house at Godric's Hollow, though of course he'd known Lux Aeterna had its own personality.

"Not talk," said Connor, his forehead wrinkling. "It's more like they have a hunger, and my mind translates the hunger for me." He blinked, and his eyes focused on Harry again. "And I think you're the best choice for someone to be heir. You don't have to take the Potter name again, just take charge of the properties if I—if I die." His voice faltered on the word, at least; Harry would have been worried if his brother had gone stoic about his own death all of a sudden. "They'll accept you, since you have the blood connection."

"Well put, Mr. Potter, well put," said Mr. Proudfoot. When Harry looked at him again, he was cringing in front of Madam Pince's scowl. "Should we take this somewhere more private?" he asked.

Harry stood up with a sigh. "There are abandoned classrooms we can use," he said, and Mr. Proudfoot nodded gratefully. Harry waited until they were out of the library and safely sitting down behind dusty desks in one of the third-floor classrooms before he added, "I understand what you mean, Connor, but I don't want them. I don't want anything to do with the Potter name except your love and your friendship."

"You won't accept money even as a gift?" Connor asked, his voice wistful. "Mr. Proudfoot told me that all the Galleons in your personal vault have reverted to me. The commitment James made to give them to you couldn't hold up against the loss of his magic, because his magic was bound to his signature."

Harry nodded; he'd expected that. Many things changed when a pureblood wizard lost his magic. "I'm sure. Thank you, Connor, but they just have too many bad memories. I won't be tied to James and Lily by anything except memories now. That's the way I want it."

Connor sighed. Mr. Proudfoot said, "Ah, Mr. Pot—Harry, but your father did leave something in trust for you, something sealed with a spell that the loss of his magic did not disrupt. Because the object is sentient, it could agree to the transfer, and its agreement was recorded again when your father lost his magic."

"What is it?" Harry asked, though he had the feeling he already knew.

"The Maze," Connor said. "It belongs to you now, Harry."

Harry had the feeling that the Maze belonged to itself as much as anyone, so he nodded. "That, I'll accept," he said.

Connor's face brightened into a smug smile. "Does that mean that you'll visit Lux Aeterna sometimes?"

Harry couldn't help a smile of his own. "Yes, sometimes. I—" He paused abruptly, as something he'd learned in his visit to Silver-Mirror last weekend came back full force. "Connor," he asked, his voice gentle. "Would you permit me to tie the Potter properties to you personally, instead of to the earth, as they are now?"

Connor's face went blank with an obvious lack of comprehension. Mr. Proudfoot, though, gasped aloud. "Mr. Potter!" he scolded. "Er, Harry," he added, when Harry shot him a look. "That is a custom followed by Dark wizarding families! Linchpins are linked to the earth they stand on, enduring in a way that Dark properties never can. Surely you cannot want your brother to be sole heir to the Potter properties, and in such a way that he must designate a sole heir? You do not want to be the one responsible for changing the very nature of his inheritance, do you?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," said Harry. "Linchpins are stakes in a web that ties the northern goblins down. I want to free them. I am vates." His gaze went back to Connor's face. "But he's the one who must make the decision."

Connor chewed his lip. Harry waited, fairly confident. He knew that, two years ago, Connor would have rejected this idea the moment he heard that it was used by Dark families. But they were not sitting in a room from two years ago, thank Merlin, and Connor knew now that Harry wouldn't agree to accept anything but the Maze. His face slowly hardened, and then he nodded once.

"I'll agree to that," he said.

"Mr. Potter!" Mr. Proudfoot was obviously scandalized all over again. "It would entail your signing numerous forms, and speaking aloud a sacred, binding oath seven days from now, and creating a will that says you surrender your linchpin—"

"Oh," Connor said, leaning forward like a lion leaping on a zebra, "so I would have to go through you, then? It isn't something Harry could do after all?"

The color drained gradually from Mr. Proudfoot's face. Harry found it wonderful to watch. The solicitor looked down at the table, hemmed, hawed, tapped his fingers for a moment, and then flung up his hands. "Yes, yes, it is," he said.

“Wonderful.” Connor’s face brightened. “Then start filing the papers at once. And since seven days from now will be Saturday again, I can swear the oath with no trouble. Oh, and bring copies of the papers so that Harry can see he owns the Maze now.” He caught Harry’s eye, and added, “I want you to have them.”

“Fine,” Harry muttered.

Mr. Proudfoot made various woeful noises, but Connor refused to listen. He suggested several alternate courses, but Connor refused to take them. He attempted to persuade them that James, not to mention their Potter ancestors, wouldn’t have wanted it this way, but Connor stared at him, and Mr. Proudfoot flushed as slowly as he had paled, doubtless recalling that Connor had testified against his own father in front of the Wizengamot, and didn’t give two figs for what James wanted.

Harry was grinning as he stood. He had to get back to studying Ariadne’s Web, Merlin knew—five days of study so far hadn’t revealed anything he could use—but at least there was this mild triumph, of knowing that one linchpin would be removed from the northern goblins’ web. And it was two triumphs, if one counted Connor acting more like himself than a Potter heir.

Harry swore softly and bent over the book, a new one on the history of Greek witches in general, and the webs they might have woven to control the sirens and various other magical creatures. Another week had ground by, and he hadn’t had any luck with the books specifically about Ariadne’s Web. Perhaps some detail about the weaving of other nets would give him a hint, however.

So far, everything he’d discovered indicated that Charles was right: surround an Ariadne’s Web with a powerful ward also linked to the caster of the Web, and there was absolutely no way to get inside without a Portkey. But Harry refused to accept that. He would find a way through it. At least Charles and Thomas so far hadn’t contacted him to say that one of their children was dead or further hurt, and Harry was sure they would have done that if it’d happened.

Thunder screamed abruptly, and Harry blinked. He was studying in one of the classrooms on the fifth floor, and he'd forgotten the storm for a time. Now, he did pay attention to it, narrowing his eyes to stare out through the glass. He didn't envy Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, who were playing their Quidditch match today.

In fact, he didn't envy anyone who had to be outside at the moment. The storms had come every other day at first, but it had been raining steadily since Wednesday. Snape had renewed the water-proofing spells on the dungeons, to make absolutely sure that they wouldn't flood, and all Care of Magical Creatures classes were being held in the Great Hall. Harry had spoken to the Many through the small snake who still wrapped securely about his throat, but they reassured him that the creatures of the Forbidden Forest were doing well enough; they were much better able to cope with harsh weather than wizards, after all.

Harry shook his head. So many problems, and I still don't know what Voldemort is doing to cause this level of disturbance in the weather.

He started to turn back to his book when a flourish of wings passed in front of his face. Harry started, and then saw a familiar gull hovering outside the window, beating at the glass desperately.

Harry Vanished the glass, let the gull fly inside, and then restored the window. He stared down at the dripping bird as she landed on the floor, looking half-waterlogged, and shivered absently in the flood of cold air that had entered with her. "Did you want something, Honoria?" he asked dryly. "You could have walked up to the school as a human, you know."

Honoria transformed back. Harry suffered an unpleasant flashback for a moment—the position in which she lay on the floor wasn't that far from the one in which she'd sprawled just after taking the Severing Curse for him in the Woodhouse battle—but she got up almost at once, and cast a warming charm on herself. She gave him a haughty look. "I found it b-bracing." The chatter of her teeth ruined the effect somewhat, and her haughty look became sheepish. A moment later, her soaked hair and streaming face vanished behind the illusion of

perfectly arranged features, and she took a chair across from him, proud as a queen.

Harry rolled his eyes. She probably made it worse flying around outside to make sure I wasn't watching the Quidditch game, and then roaming from window to window in search of me. Idiot. "Was there something you wanted to ask me in person, then?" he asked. He and most of his allies had been communicating using Charles's spell lately, since it was faster than either owl or firecall, and Harry was determined not to forget his advantages again.

"Yes," said Honoria. "Or rather, something that magic requires me to ask in person. I'm calling in my life debt that you owe me from the Woodhouse battle."

Harry blinked. "All right, then. What do you want?"

Honoria leaned forward. "You said that Augustus Starrise is joining the alliance?" Harry nodded, wondering if she had come to ask him to persuade Augustus out of it. Honoria didn't say that, though. "I want you to try and reconcile him and Tybalt."

Harry closed his eyes. He knew Augustus better now, from several letters they'd exchanged, and of course he knew what Tybalt was like. He wasn't looking forward to this. "What was the cause of their disagreement in the first place?" He couldn't recall either Augustus or Tybalt specifically mentioning it.

"Tybalt got joined to John," said Honoria. "And John's Muggleborn. Augustus thinks Muggleborns are good enough to protect and say you like, but not good enough to bring into the family."

Harry groaned. So I'm up against pureblood bigotry. Great.

"Don't think of it as a problem," said Honoria brightly. "Think of it as a grand opportunity. After all, you'd have to confront the prejudices that the pureblood families carry sometime, right? This is practice."

Harry nodded wearily and stood, carefully putting the book on Greek magic aside. He did feel the urge, for just a moment, to say that life

wasn't fair, and to ask Honoria to make her life debt watching him wrestle dragons or something similar.

But, if he hadn't asked for these burdens when he decided to be a leader, he hadn't put himself in a position to refuse them, either. He opened his eyes and smiled at Honoria. "Let's contact them, then, and tell them we want to meet."

Chapter Fifty: Waltzing Politics

Harry sighed as he folded Augustus Starrise's letter. At least the man had actually agreed to come and speak to his nephew at Hogwarts, instead of insisting that Tybalt and Harry go to the Starrise home. Harry knew it wouldn't have been neutral ground, couldn't have been, not after Augustus had kicked Tybalt out of it.

He shifted and cast a longing glance at the book on Greek witches on the other end of the library table. He'd spent the rest of Saturday writing to Augustus and arguing with Tybalt by means of the spell that Charles had taught him, trying to convince him to come to Hogwarts. It had taken hours to wear Tybalt down, and then he had only agreed to come if John could come with him and Honoria could be there. Harry had agreed, glad to win any kind of victory after hours of argument.

And then Augustus's letter had come this morning, full of pompous agreement to speak in negotiations because "he was not in the wrong," and he was sure that a conversation or two would show Harry that.

Harry sighed and glanced at the other letter waiting for him. It had the Ministry seal on it, and he knew it came from Scrimgeour. He didn't want to read it. Merlin knew what the Minister had discovered that required his attention, and required him to communicate with Harry about it.

"Harry?"

And there was Draco, threading in between the library tables with a determined expression on his face. Harry winced. Draco had accepted, over the last couple of weeks, that Harry was too busy researching Ariadne's Web to help him with his possession gift, save in scattered lessons, or even spend much time with him. But from the way he sat down on the chair at the other end of the table, his patience had just run out.

"Harry," Draco said, insistently.

“I’m paying attention,” Harry said quietly, and reminded himself that he had no right to complain. He had wanted this position of leader, at least to the extent that he hadn’t objected all that much when it fell on him, and he had commanded his allies’ help in battle and the Minister’s help in politics. And Draco had given him so much more than mere help. That all his debts were coming due at once was unfortunate, but no more than that. It was not a malicious conspiracy, and it was not evil, and he had no reason to feel dread coiling in his stomach as Draco stared at him.

What Draco said was completely unexpected, however, and rather ruined Harry’s attempts to keep a smooth mask.

“Have you spoken with Vera since that night we came back from the trial?”

Harry stared at Draco. “No?” he asked at last, but when Draco gave him a searching glance, he shook his head. “No. You know I haven’t. Why? Is something the matter with her?” He supposed Vera might have had to leave the school, if her gift had started to overwhelm her, but he couldn’t imagine her not coming and telling him if she had to.

“No.” Draco leaned forward. “And she hasn’t come to nag me about it, either. I just think that you should go and talk to her.”

Harry couldn’t help the snort that broke from him. “Sorry, Draco, I can’t. I have a meeting with Augustus and Tybalt Starrise—not to mention Tybalt’s partner and Honoria Pemberley—at noon.” He nodded to the Minister’s letter. “And that to answer, too. I’m not sure what Scrimgeour wants. Then I should get back to looking up material on Ariadne’s Web.” He eyed the book, but controlled his longing to reach for it. For all he knew, Scrimgeour’s letter could take hours to answer.

“What about this evening?” Draco persisted. “Surely your meeting with the Starrises ought to be over by then?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know how long it’ll take to persuade Tybalt and Augustus to reconcile. Probably longer than just today, though.”

“Then dismiss them if they’re still here when evening comes, and go talk to Vera,” said Draco firmly.

Harry frowned. “Are you sure she didn’t talk to you, Draco? It’s all right to say if she did. I know I’ve been neglecting her lately, but I don’t think I have much choice. I have to figure out how to break Ariadne’s Web.”

Draco leaned forward over the table and clasped his hand. “She hasn’t spoken to me about you, just about my own soul—”

“Really? What did she say?” Harry felt pleased. Draco quite obviously didn’t give himself enough credit for some of what he knew and was, but he would have to trust a Seer’s word on the subject.

Draco shook his head. “Oh, no. I am not getting you interested in something else, not when you’d just try to pursue it. My conversations with Vera are staying between her and me for right now. The point, Harry, is that I think you’ve started neglecting your own healing for the sake of others’.”

Harry lifted his head. “I didn’t! I promise, Draco, I haven’t. I meant what I said that night in the Room of Requirement. I’m not going backwards. I promise.” He felt a mild panic at the thought of Draco disbelieving him. Going through this change was something Harry had known would be hard, but if he had to go through it alone—he didn’t think he would have the strength to do it.

“Harry!” Draco’s free hand settled on his shoulder. “Harry, it’s all right,” he said softly. “Breathe. I don’t disbelieve you. I don’t think you’re going backwards. But you’re neglecting it, yes.”

Harry stirred restlessly and looked at the book again. “I have to figure out how to break Ariadne’s Web, Draco,” he said. “My allies’ children are trapped in that school, not to mention Greg and all of the others. No one should have to be at Bellatrix Lestrange’s mercy.” He shuddered as a memory of the graveyard bit him, and his left hand throbbed. He didn’t care that it wasn’t there; it still throbbed. “What kind of leader am I, if I don’t figure out how to break it?”

“You’ve looked for two weeks,” said Draco. “Do you really think there’s still something left to find? And I’m sure that Rosier-Henlin and Rhangnara are looking as well. Do you think they have less motivation than you do to find a solution? Harry, stop driving yourself mad over this. Think about something else. You can’t find a way past Ariadne’s Web right now. That’s all right. It’s all right. I promise.”

“And what if she kills one of them?” Harry clenched his hand shut until he saw Draco wince, and realized he’d injured him. He pulled his hand back at once, and shook his head, whipping his fingers through his fringe. “Sorry. Sorry. I’m sorry. I just—I have to do something.”

“You can’t,” said Draco softly.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. Merlin, is he right? But admitting that felt like he was giving up without a fight. There had to be a solution, something he was overlooking. The thought of anyone at Bellatrix Lestrange’s mercy made him feel like someone had used the Entrail-Expelling Curse on him again, and even though he knew that was exactly the reason Voldemort had chosen to use children as his hostages, that didn’t make the feeling go away.

“Enough, Harry.” Draco moved up behind him and caught him in a close embrace. “I didn’t realize you were driving yourself this close to breakdown over it, and neither did Professor Snape, or he would have made you stop researching. Think about something else. There are other things happening.” He lowered his head and rubbed his cheek against Harry’s hair.

“I know that,” Harry whispered, turning his head so that he could rest his cheek on Draco’s chest. “But I need to think about and research Ariadne’s Web, and find time for them, too.”

“Harry.” Draco made it all but a command, now. “Leave it up to Rosier-Henlin and Rhangnara.”

“There might be books at Hogwarts that—”

“Then I’m sure the Headmistress wouldn’t deny them permission to come here and do the research,” said Draco firmly. “But you’re not

going to do them or their children any good by worrying yourself into a frenzy. And if they're not contacting you begging or imploring you to do anything right now, then why do you think you have to?"

"I'm vates," whispered Harry. "It's a web. I have to break it."

"Not the moment you hear of it." Draco's arms clamped around his shoulders. "I mean it, Harry. Calm down and think about something else, or I'll speak to Rosier-Henlin and Rhangnara. You haven't talked to them at all in the last two weeks, have you? You decided that you absolutely had to solve the problem right away on your own? They didn't ask you to do this?"

"No, but the hostages are children, Draco—"

"And they're beyond your reach right now," Draco finished quietly. "That's the way it has to be, Harry. If it will make you feel better, select some books and send them to Rosier-Henlin and Rhangnara. But leave the task of research up to them. They're parents. They have all the love and worry needed in the world. You're going to have to start trusting your allies to do things on their own at some point, Harry."

Harry winced. He was remembering a conversation he and Draco had had summer before fourth year, when Draco had reminded him that some people might want to follow Harry, and he would have to let them, because it was their free will. This sounded suspiciously like that.

"I—I'll try," he whispered. The thought of the children was still tearing at him, but he recognized his own frustration from his childhood. Whenever he got upset, his effectiveness at training in spells and doing other things necessary to protecting Connor would go down. Right now, it was affecting the way he thought about other necessary tasks than breaking the web, and probably also the way he read the books. Intolerable as it was to leave the web intact for this long, it would be even more intolerable to miss something that could have helped the children at Durmstrang because he was flipping feverishly through the books instead of taking the time to absorb the information.

“Good,” Draco said, and held him for a moment. Harry let himself absorb the heat for as long as he could before the shivers of discomfort broke out and he had to sit up and move away. Draco sighed, but said nothing, just taking the seat across from him again and eyeing him intently.

“Promise me that you’ll speak with Vera this evening?”

Harry nodded. “I didn’t mean to stop,” he protested again. It was important that Draco understand that. “It’s just—other things came up.”

“Someday, I hope,” said Draco, his face easing back from its tightness, “you’ll learn that not everyone expects you to solve every problem, right now.” He let one hand brush along Harry’s shoulder, and then departed the library.

Harry watched him go, a feeling of determination growing in the pit of his stomach. Draco did so much for him—speaking words he couldn’t have been all that fond of speaking, or thought that Harry should have known already, since they were common sense; reaching out to him; refusing to abandon him in a fit of exasperation or temper until Harry actually did see sense.

He deserved better than Harry had been able to give him so far. But since Harry knew Draco wasn’t about to go anywhere, at least he could try to give Draco what he was able to give him.

Harry sighed the resolution out, then picked up the Minister’s letter. It was brief, as Scrimgeour’s letters tended to be, and to the point.

December 3rd, 1995

Dear Harry:

I require your help to make some important decisions. There are three people currently in Tullianum with whom you have some connection: Kingsley Shacklebolt, who tried to kill you; Fiona Mallory, who tortured your parents; and Homer Digne, who wrote articles to discredit you and also apparently permitted another member of the

Order of the Phoenix to visit Dumbledore and free him so he could cast his spell. All of them are claiming they acted as they did because of Dumbledore's compulsion spell. I have to know if you are willing to press charges or not. Please come to the Ministry this afternoon if you are free. Enclosed is a Portkey that will bear you to my office anytime between noon and six-o'clock this evening.

Rufus Scrimgeour.

Harry sighed, and eyed the Portkey, a bottle cap, that tipped out of the envelope. That meant he would probably have to cut his meeting with Tybalt and Augustus Starrise short, in order to journey to the Ministry and talk to Scrimgeour, and could give them only a few hours.

Do you owe them more than a few hours?

Harry paused, and shook his head. That was a new thought, and in a new tone, one that might have been Vera's. He supposed he was only having it at all because of everything else he had to do. Circumstances were finally conspiring to make it impossible for him to do everything, much as he hated to admit it, so he would have to juggle and cut some things short, and if that meant not listening to Augustus and Tybalt rant at each other all day, so be it.

Honorina had not said, after all, that he had to reconcile the two proud and stubborn men or die trying. She had said only that she wanted him to do what he could to initiate a reconciliation.

Harry slid the Minister's Portkey into his pocket, wrote a brief note to tell him he'd be coming later in the afternoon that he would take to the Owlery in a moment, and scooped up the book on Greek magic. He would look through it, see if there was anything useful, and ask Charles where he should send it if there was. No, on second thought, he would speak to Thomas. Charles had said that he would be negotiating with old contacts in an effort to get a Portkey that would actually take them to Durmstrang, and might be at that and not want to be disturbed.

Harry set his mouth in a thin line. So this is the way it has to be. I can't do everything perfectly, because I'm not perfect. I'll do what I

can, and ask others to live with it. If they can't, they can always withdraw from the alliance.

"Thank you for coming."

Augustus gave Harry a lazy smile, and kept his eyes perfectly trained on Harry's face. "Thank you for inviting me, my lord."

Harry grimaced at the title. "Please, none of that." He gestured to the large round table that took up the center of the Room of Requirement. The Room had seemed to know what they needed—in this case, a table that absolutely would not make anyone feel unequal to anyone else. "Have a seat. Your nephew, his partner, and Miss Pemberley should be here soon."

Augustus had started to sit down, but he paused, his face acquiring a light flush. "You did not say they would be here."

"I didn't say they wouldn't be, either." Harry stared directly into the older wizard's eyes. Augustus reminded him much of Lucius Malfoy as he had been when they were still doing the truce-dance, but worse, in a way, because Lucius was perfectly aware that he was being a bastard, and enjoyed it. Augustus seemed to think that this proud coldness was the only way he could act, and compliance with his wishes the only reasonable thing to do. "That was Tybalt's condition for agreeing to speak with you. He wanted his partner and his best friend at his side. I didn't think those were unreasonable requests."

Augustus, amazingly, sat down, but shook his head so that his long pale hair, braided with bells, rang and shifted. Harry actually found that encouraging. If Augustus wanted to remind Harry about his training as a war wizard, that was a sign that he was less than perfectly confident. "You know Miss Pemberley by now, I would assume, my—Harry. You know that she will interrupt, make a scene, and do anything that she can to disrupt matters."

"I don't think she will," said Harry. "She was the one who asked for me to try and manage your reconciliation. But I acknowledge that she might not be able to control herself. If she does show a sign of starting to interrupt in any way, then I'll cast a *Silencio* on her. She's

not Starrise by blood, and she wasn't the one who was part of Tybalt's original offense against you." Harry had to fight hard not to curl his lip when he said "offense," but he succeeded. "She has no reason to talk."

Augustus nodded, once. "I must say, Harry, that you are being more reasonable about this than I expected," he murmured.

"Why?" Harry kept an eye on the door of the Room. McGonagall had promised to send Tybalt, John, and Honoria to him the moment they arrived, and since she would be with her friends, Honoria couldn't come flying in as a gull. But he still thought he would have only a moment between the door opening and the first insult being hurled, unless he managed to get in between Tybalt and his uncle with formalities. "I don't want discord among my allies, Merlin knows."

"Ah, but your mother was Muggleborn," said Augustus smoothly. "I thought you would at once attack me for my—what would be the term? Unreasonable prejudice, is what Tybalt has called it. I thought you would insist loudly that of course they are equal to purebloods in each and every way, and should be able to marry into any pureblood family they want."

"I do believe that." Harry tensed, then shook his head when he realized that the flicker of movement he'd seen was his own shadow. In shifting his weight from foot to foot, he'd managed to send it skittering across the door.

"What?" Augustus sounded unsettled.

Harry turned his head and frowned at the man. "I don't insist that my allies think exactly like I do," he said shortly. "What would be the point of that? You have your own mind, your own soul, your own beliefs. You've seen mine, and you can't object to them too badly, or you wouldn't have chosen to join the alliance. I can hope to persuade you as time passes, but I won't force you. I certainly won't attack you."

Augustus stared hard at him. Harry rolled his eyes, and then turned swiftly back the other way as the door opened.

Honorio came in first, clad in a flowing robe much like a gown, ornamented with illusions of letters that spelled out Tybalt's name with several exclamation marks after it. Harry narrowed his eyes warningly at her, and she did no more than pout at him. At least the letters didn't seem to spell anything insulting to Augustus, Harry saw with relief.

Tybalt followed her. He wore a blood-red robe touched with threads of blue. John, at his side, wore red touched with gold. Harry stifled a groan. John's robe said that he could and would declare blood-feud if the negotiations didn't go to his liking; it was a reference back to the old days of wizarding politics when "blood and gold" would have been the reward a displeased family tried to claim from others. Tybalt wore only slightly less offensive colors, proclaiming his willingness to accept either blood or a sky untouched by a cloud—the cloud in this case being the presence of a relative he hated.

Harry felt frustration start churning in his gut, and decided abruptly that he might as well speak it out. Both Augustus and Tybalt, for all their agreement, had come prepared to undermine the negotiations. Why should he have to put up with that? He was the one who was doing something he didn't have to do, putting himself in the way of a family quarrel, and if neither party would take it seriously, then he didn't intend to waste his time here. He had dozens of more productive things he could be doing than trying to reconcile people who refused to be reconciled.

"Change the colors of your robes, now," he snapped at Tybalt and John. "Or admit that you just came to play games, and then we can all leave."

Tybalt had his mouth open, probably to insult his uncle, but he shut it. He stared at Harry. Harry frowned back at him. The sensation of eyes on him didn't bother him at all when he was angry at the person in question.

Tybalt decided to play dumb—not a wise choice when it was only his actions that were stupid. "But, Harry," he chirped, "we wanted to wear these colors. I think they look particularly fine on us." He looked at John as if he were about to shag his partner in the middle of the floor.

John returned the look. Harry could hear Augustus's bells shake as he shifted in place.

"You knew perfectly well what you were doing," said Harry flatly. "Change them, now. I mean it."

"But you have to fulfill the life debt," Honoria said. "I asked you for to try and reconcile Tybalt and Augustus, and—"

"That's what I'm doing," said Harry. "I got them in the same room. I'm prepared to play diplomat if they actually want to try. If not, then I will send them home like misbehaving children." He frowned at Honoria. "And, while we're at it, Honoria, you should know that it's forbidden for the person owed the life debt to do something that makes it harder for the other wizard to pay them back, unless they deliberately use difficult wording in the initial request. You know what these colors mean, and you let them wear them anyway."

Honoria's face was pale now. "I thought—I thought it would be funny," she said. "A joke."

"And yet, I am not laughing." Harry spun around and faced Augustus. "I apologize, sir. I didn't know they would do this."

Augustus inclined his head, his eyes glinting, and chose to say nothing at all. Harry wondered if that was wisdom on his part or sadistic amusement—if he was perhaps looking forward to seeing how Harry would deal with two wizards and a witch he obviously did regard as disobedient youngsters.

"I wanted to wear these colors," said John then, spinning Harry back around. "Tybalt did tell me what they mean, but I wanted to wear them because they express what I feel."

Harry had his answer. "So you came never intending to reconcile at all." He nodded. "That's good to know. Well, now you've had your joke and your insult, and the terms of my life debt to Miss Pemberley are fulfilled. She asked that I try to reconcile your partner and his uncle. I've tried. That's enough."

“How can you take him seriously?” Tybalt demanded. “Look at him, the pompous braggart! Bells in his hair, of all the stupid affectations! And he’s prejudiced against Muggleborns, and your mother was one, and you know that’s not right, Harry. How can you defend—“

“An heir who turns against the legacy of his bloodline?” Augustus asked, his voice soft and mocking. “A boy who is a traitor to the memory of his mother? I would wonder more if Harry were trying to defend you. He renounced his legacy rather than try to be an heir of the Potter line when he knew it would be impossible for him, and he gave up his parents rather than continue to mock and torment them. If only you could follow his example, Tybalt.”

“I am not a traitor to the memory of my mother! Take that—“

“You are.” Augustus leaned forward, the gold-bound white staff in his hand glinting. Harry had backed out of the space between them. “Alba would be horrified, could she see the elder son she bore. Defying everything his uncle asked of him, turning his back on his family instead of—“

“She would be horrified if she could see?” Tybalt’s face was as red and pale-splotchy as someone in the early stages of dragonpox. “I thought you believed she did see. You certainly talk about her as often as if she were still alive. You were always a little bit obsessed with her, in fact, uncle. I wonder, is the rumor I heard about you two true? That you didn’t have separate beds until you were seventeen?”

Augustus lurched to his feet with a wordless roar and a mighty clash of bells, and lowered his staff. Harry felt it begin to shake with magic. Augustus was one of those wizards who stored some of his power in another object, and could cast it back wandlessly when he had need. Merlin knew what spell he was thinking about using on his nephew right now.

Harry shook his head and reached out to the Room of Requirement. It manifested a stone wall between Augustus and Tybalt, quickly enough that they both stopped yelling in astonishment. Harry walked to the door, though he did turn to survey them briefly.

“If you don’t both leave Hogwarts quietly and go home without attempting to hurt each other,” he said, “then I will know, and I will cast you both out of the alliance. I won’t stand for my allies attacking each other. I declare the terms of the life debt fulfilled, and this experiment a failure, and both of you closer in family resemblance than you probably like to think, given your shared flair for insults. I’m disappointed in both of you. I suppose it’s useless to remind you that, in fact, I am the one who’s fifteen years old here?”

He stepped out of the Room and shut the door behind him, half-wishing it would just keep them cooped up in there. But someone might die if it did.

He went to tell Snape and Draco—they were both in the dungeons, with Snape helping Draco with an experimental potion he wanted to try—that he was going to the Ministry. If people would be children, Harry would go and do something more productive. Sometimes, Rufus hated having to follow the rules.

In this case, the rules said that he was not allowed to hex people just for breathing, even if all three of those people were Aurors who had failed him in various ways. He had to remain in the anteroom to Tullianum, where Shackbolt, Mallory, and Dagle waited under the eyes of three considerably more rule-abiding Aurors, and pretend to be concentrating on his paperwork. Harry had owed to say that he was coming to speak about pressing charges, or not, “later in the afternoon.” And since Rufus had been the one to send him a Portkey set for any time between noon and six in the evening, he was the one who’d condemned himself to sitting in one place until Harry arrived.

Dagle breathed as if he were thinking of arguments to excuse his actions, and just barely restraining himself from saying them. Mallory breathed huffily, coming out at the end with a sigh—a pattern Rufus was familiar with, since he’d crouched beside her before in ambush. Shackbolt breathed like an old man. All of them were claiming that Dumbledore’s compulsion spell had caused them to act the way they had. Rufus disbelieved Dagle, at the least, but there was nothing he could do about it; both Veritaserum and Legilimency were illegal

unless the person in question consented to them, and none of the prisoners had. The next step was up to Harry.

A soft gleam came from off to the side, and the prisoners all turned expectantly towards it. Rufus was pleased to see that their guards, at least, kept their wands trained on the prisoners, not the gleam. The light resolved into a whirling Harry, who recovered his balance neatly and slid the bottle cap back into his pocket.

“Sir,” he said to Rufus, with a nod, and then turned and looked at the prisoners. His mouth tightened. Rufus could see his eyes suddenly looking older, but wasn’t entirely sure what emotion made them look so. Harry said nothing else, his eyes intent on Mallory’s face, so Rufus took it on himself to make the introductions.

“Kingsley Shacklebolt,” he said. “Order of the Phoenix member until I sacked him, and now claiming that Dumbledore compelled him to try and murder you. Fiona Mallory, once Head Auror, and now claiming that Dumbledore’s spell compelled her to torture your parents—“

“It did,” said Mallory loudly. “I would have managed to restrain myself if it hadn’t been for the spell.”

Rufus shot her a hard glance. Come down to it, I don’t believe her, either. Mallory was his greatest failure. He was the one who had put her in charge of the Aurors, and he should have removed her altogether when he first found her hurting the Potters, not merely forbidden her to handle the case. “And Homer Digne, Muggleborn Auror and undercover Order of the Phoenix member, claiming that he only wrote articles under the name Argus Veritaserum and sent them to the Daily Prophet because Dumbledore forced him to do that.”

“But you also let someone have access to Dumbledore,” Harry told Digne. “Didn’t you? So that means that you had to have known what you were doing before the spell even took effect.”

Rufus grinned. He knew it was a harsh and frightening expression, but merely knowing that didn’t much inspire him to change it. He had believed that, too, but Digne refused to comment one way or the other, probably so that he wouldn’t reveal whoever else had been in on his

crime. Even Wilmot hadn't been able to get the information out of him. Harry could, perhaps, get him to reveal who had been at Dumbledore, and then Rufus would be one step closer to thoroughly cleansing his Ministry.

Diggle's face retained the same bored expression it had since he had come to the anteroom. "I was a victim of the spell," he said. "And of Dumbledore's reputation. I believed him to be a good man. Now I know he is not."

"You didn't believe the accusations of child abuse," said Harry. "But you believe him to be an evil man because he compelled you?"

Diggle shrugged. "Yes."

Rufus ground the teeth. The man wasn't even trying hard to pretend he was innocent. But rules forbade Rufus from using any of the tools that would have proven his guilt. Diggle had a convenient excuse, a too-convenient one, in that thrice-bedamned spell. He could escape prosecution entirely, at least if Harry declined to press charges, and the Daily Prophet was of course claiming that they had no idea the man sending them the articles had been an Order of the Phoenix member. Rufus wished, as he often had, that someone had invented a spell that would force all reporters to write only the truth. Just for one day. One day is all I ask for.

"I don't believe you," said Harry softly.

Diggle tensed. "Are you using Legilimency on me?" he demanded, and Rufus blinked in astonishment. Diggle hadn't shown any signs of losing his composure since the day in Rufus's office when he'd tried to draw his wand and Wilmot had stopped him. Now his shoulders were hunched, and his voice snapped out the words. "You know that's illegal."

Rufus leaned back in his chair and raised his eyebrows. It's Harry's presence, I think. That's upsetting him. Merlin, how Diggle must hate the boy.

Harry looked calmly at the ex-Auror. "I'm not using Legilimency on you. I just said that I don't believe you. You were in the Order. You believed in what Dumbledore was doing. You let someone have access to him even though you knew that he would be able to cast magic if he was freed of the Still-Beetle confinement—magic that could potentially have a number of disastrous effects on me or on anyone else he disliked. You might have believed you were doing the right thing before the compulsion, but what you did was still illegal and dangerous."

Diggle hissed through his teeth. "I don't believe in him now," he said—entirely unconvincingly. Rufus snorted. I might be forced to let him go if we can't prove anything against him, but I can certainly sack him.

"I think you do," said Harry quietly. "And I don't think that I can let you walk out of here. Granted, you might not attack me again, but you might attack someone else I care about. You caused a great deal of potential damage to other people's minds, even if only indirectly. You took away their free will." Rufus hid a smile at the chill gleam in Harry's eyes. "I'm going to press charges for that." He turned and nodded at Rufus. "Libel for a start, and I'd certainly think indirect magical endangerment is a potential charge, since he had to have known that any spell Dumbledore cast would be bound to affect me."

"Very true," Rufus agreed gravely, trying to keep from laughing. "We'll charge him, then."

"You can't!" Diggle spat. "You have no evidence!"

"I have someone who would be willing to help me procure some," said Harry brightly. "Does the name Henrietta Bulstrode mean anything to you, Diggle?"

Rufus saw the whiplash of shock that crossed the man's face. He recovered to sneer, "She has no evidence, either," but he hadn't been quick enough. Rufus made a quiet note to investigate Diggle's connection to Henrietta Bulstrode, and any visits he might have made to her.

Harry nodded at him, and turned to Mallory, giving her a searching stare. “Do you really think that you would have been able to control yourself, if not for Dumbledore’s spell?” he asked.

Mallory looked down. Rufus recognized the gesture. Fiona was ashamed of herself, and was trying to hold strong in the face of that shame. It overwhelmed her, though. It usually did. She was so used to thinking of herself in the right that when something did prick her conscience, it had to be a strong sting.

“I—I think so,” she whispered. “I was taken off the case because I bothered them before. I had maintained my distance for a few months by the time I lost control and cursed them. I could feel the desire to do it growing stronger and stronger, but I didn’t tell anyone for fear of being sacked. Yes, I think it was the spell.”

Harry stared at her bowed head for a long moment. Rufus could not tell what he was thinking. Finally, he sighed and said, “I won’t press charges, Minister. I still don’t want her anywhere near Lily or James, mind—not assigned to patrol the corridors that contain their cells, even. But no, no charges.”

Rufus nodded. In truth, it was a bit irregular to ask if Harry wanted to press charges against Mallory at all, but Lily and James had no right to do so from prison, and the Ministry itself was concerned in her case, so Rufus hadn’t felt right prosecuting her without giving Harry a say. As it was, any further punishment would be up to Amelia Bones, as her immediate supervisor, since there was no doubt that she had done it; only her motivation was in question. Rufus was fairly sure that Amelia would arrange to sack Mallory quietly.

It was a worse end than he had once dreamed of when he hired Mallory despite her past and her issues, but a better one than she would have had if Harry had decided to bring up charges, perhaps for mental pain.

That left Shacklebolt. Harry chewed his lip for a long moment as he stared at the tall man, who kept his head bowed over his hands. Then he said, “And why did you use the Killing Curse? Why not just a spell

that might stun me or Obliviate me and keep me from testifying in the trial?"

Shacklebolt huddled down in the chair, but his voice, though flat, was clear. "Because that wasn't the compulsion that took hold of me. It said you were supposed to be dead, not just incapable of hurting your parents further."

Harry nodded slowly. "And how long did you feel that compulsion?"

"That one? Since just that morning." Shacklebolt looked up. His eyes were haunted, but Rufus could not be sure how much of that was real. Shacklebolt had been a wonderful actor when he was still an Auror; it had taken Rufus's suspicions, that he had a greater loyalty to a Light Lord than to the Ministry, months to coalesce. "Before that, I just felt the same vague disgust that I think everyone under the compulsion felt."

Harry held still for a long time, his face unhappy. Then he asked, "Did you work towards my destruction, or the destruction of anyone I hold dear, at all before the compulsion spell was cast?"

Shacklebolt stiffened. Then he said, "I don't think you're allowed to ask me that. Is he?" Absurdly, he glanced at Rufus.

Rufus tilted his head. "He's potentially going to charge you for attempted murder and using an Unforgivable," he said helpfully. "I'd say he's allowed to ask you anything he damn well pleases." Sometimes, there are ways to get around the rules.

Shacklebolt squirmed. Then he said, "No," but his pause and his question to Rufus had marked him. Harry's eyes narrowed.

"I don't wish to charge him," he said coolly. "But there were other people on the street with me that morning, and he cast the Killing Curse more than once. I think you should talk to Lucius Malfoy, Minister. He might be interested to know that Shacklebolt's first victim would have been his own son, if I hadn't knocked Draco to the ground."

“But that was an accident!” Shacklebolt exclaimed. “I was under a compulsion at the time. I had no idea—”

“I don’t believe you,” said Harry steadily. “I really don’t. I’m not going to charge you with anything, but that’s as far as I’ll take it. I don’t know what else to do in this situation, so I’ll leave it in the Ministry’s capable hands.” He glanced at Rufus with his eyebrows raised, and Rufus inclined his head. Without someone charging him, Shacklebolt couldn’t remain in Tullianum for much longer, but Rufus was sure that Mr. Malfoy would be highly interested in keeping the man who had almost hurt his son from making a reappearance.

It’ll probably end in snapping his wand, Rufus thought, but he was not entirely displeased. They didn’t really need to imprison or execute Shacklebolt, simply make sure that he couldn’t do any more harm—or else that he was useful to their cause, whether or not he wanted to be. Releasing him, and then keeping tabs on him, to see who else he contacted, was an option, as well.

“Then I think I have no other business here,” said Harry crisply. “Thank you for inviting me to be part of this, Minister. I’ll file charges against Digne through my guardian, and—”

Digne moved. He’d sat back down in his chair, half-slumped, ever since Harry had first spoken of filing charges, but now he uncoiled and shot straight at Harry. He had no wand, but he did have something small and glittering in his hand, something that shone like steel, and which Rufus could not believe the Tullianum guards hadn’t found and taken away.

Harry stepped calmly to the side, so that Digne’s stabbing hand soared past his shoulder, and then concentrated on the man’s feet. An invisible rope tangled them and appeared to pull tight. The next instant, Digne was dangling upside down above the floor, his robes falling to cover his head and the knife plummeting out of his hand to ring on the hard stone. The three Aurors in the room belatedly swore and lifted their wands to point at him, though two of them turned back to Mallory and Shacklebolt before Rufus had to snap at them.

Harry, breathing slightly faster, looked at Rufus and said, "Do you think a charge of attempted murder without the compulsion would be more trouble than it's worth?"

"No," said Rufus flatly. All his amusement at the events of the afternoon drained away. He was going to figure out how Diggle had got that knife. It seemed he still had plants in his Ministry. In such cases, he was more than willing to bend the rules. "I think it would be an excellent idea, and you may press that charge through your guardian as well, if you want."

Harry winced. "I would prefer the Ministry handle it, actually, sir. If Professor Snape hears that I was almost killed when visiting the Ministry on my own, I'll have to have guards again for at least a month."

Rufus nodded. Veritaserum blends well with pumpkin juice. "I'll handle it, Mr. Pot—Harry."

"Thank you, sir," said Harry quietly. "Do you have a Portkey that will take me back?"

"Grip the Portkey I gave you and say Portus again," said Rufus. He gave the boy a quick glance, making absolutely sure that he wasn't damaged, and then focused on Diggle again as Harry nodded to him and vanished. The man had no excuse to claim compulsion now. And he knew who the person had been who had caused Dumbledore's magic to spread.

He was going to talk. Rufus was not amused by murder attempts of any kind, especially ones that happened right in front of him. Harry hesitated outside the small room in which he'd had his last talk with Vera, and swallowed. He had to admit that he was only here because of his promise to Draco. It would have been—well, not better, but all right not to speak with her for a while, right? He'd originally planned to use this evening for research, but Thomas had told him to send the book on Greek witches and anything else he thought might help to the Ministry Auror office, care of his wife, who was now Head Auror, so that Voldemort wouldn't see them communicating. Harry

had obeyed that command so enthusiastically that he now had no likely books left to look at.

He could have used this for something else, though. His healing wasn't less important than other things, it was just, well—

“You may go in, Harry.”

Harry jumped and glanced over his shoulder. Vera stood behind him, her smile patient and her eyes either not amused or simply inscrutable, so that he had no chance of telling what she was feeling. Harry bowed his head, swallowed, and pushed the door open.

The room remained almost as it had been, with the strange white chairs and the large fireplace, but now paintings hung on the wall, formless blue designs that Harry supposed might comfort Vera and be a touch of the Sanctuary in a strange place. There was a sprawled mass of cloth on the chair where Vera had sat last time, which she moved to take her seat. Harry wondered if she was actually making something, or only putting stitches together for fun. Then she looked up at him, and he didn't have any excuse to avoid sitting down in his own chair.

“Your Malfoy thinks you've been avoiding me,” said Vera quietly.

“I haven't,” said Harry. “I really haven't. I just got caught up in other things, and thought this could wait.”

Vera cocked her head at him. “And you think that is a true statement, rather than a relic of your training to put yourself last?”

“Yes.” It was important they understand that. Harry didn't intend to ever go backwards again. “You've heard about the situation with Durmstrang? And Ariadne's Web? And the children trapped there?”

“Your Malfoy has told me something of it.”

Harry nodded. "I have to do something to help them. I'm a vates; I want to break the web. And they're just children. It's not like they chose to take sides in this war, or chose their parents' politics, or ever asked to be caught up in what Bellatrix Lestrange is going to do to them. Someone has to stop that, and no one else has found a solution so far. So why shouldn't I try?"

Vera calmly pressed a strand of brown hair back behind her ear as it tried to escape its tight roll, never looking away from him while she did it. Harry squirmed. He could tell himself that she'd seen his soul already and knew things about him that not even he did, but that didn't keep the intense physical pressure of her gaze from bothering him.

"There is no reason you should not try," Vera agreed, after a silence that Harry thought went on much too long, and made him think things he didn't want to think. "But there is no reason that you should blame yourself for this happening, or for failing to find a solution immediately."

Harry clenched his teeth, and then swallowed. "I am part of the reason this happened," he murmured. "I'm part of the war."

"Do you truly blame yourself?"

Harry shook his head. "It's complicated."

"I have no pressing appointments, Harry, I assure you." Vera smiled at him. "Take as long as you like to speak."

And that was another reason he still felt uncomfortable talking to her, Harry thought. Vera appeared to really believe that the outside world stopped when she was feeling him out, as though no one else could possibly need her help. Harry never forgot that the world was turning, that people were suffering and dying, that magical creatures were imprisoned elsewhere. It was one of the things that put him in an agony of impatience. He wanted to heal himself, yes, but couldn't people see that it would have to fit in and around the gaps of larger, more important tasks?

He paused. Something about the thought seemed familiar, but from the other side, as if it were something he had once argued against. After a few instants of sifting through his memories, he found it.

He'd told Draco, after Draco cast the Killing Curse, that there was no getting past the business of daily life, that he couldn't simply fulfill his duties and then relax. There were always more duties coming up. There were always new crises appearing. There was always the chance that something more pressing would distract him from healing or from the time set aside for pleasure.

He'd said that to comfort Draco, but it was true, wasn't it? He survived by putting his head down and pushing.

And that meant that, if he was serious about healing, he couldn't rush through all his other duties and then heal. More duties would appear like toadstools. He had to accept them, be ready for them. There was never a time when he could stop living and heal. He would have to integrate healing into his life and push through it just like any other task.

"Ah," said Vera. "I see by your scowl that you appear to have arrived at a conclusion."

Harry sighed and resisted the urge to put his head in his arms. It would ultimately make him feel childish, which wouldn't give him the comfort he was seeking right now. "Yes, I have," he said unwillingly. "I can't put this off and hope a better day comes for dealing with it. That day will never come, not as long as Voldemort is alive, and maybe not after, either. I'm a vates, after all, and I have to be available to help the magical creatures. I would always think I was going to heal myself after I freed the sirens, or negotiated a peace with the nundus, or helped this or that or the other species. It would never end, would it?"

"It would not," Vera confirmed calmly. "And, Harry, you should consider that if you heal yourself, you will become a stronger vates."

Harry cocked his head. "I wouldn't have expected you to say that, since you're so insistent on my healing myself for myself."

"It is, nonetheless, something that will happen. I simply do not think you should make it your primary goal, to heal for others." Vera leaned forward. "You have had your talk with your Malfoy as I requested, and heard what he wanted. Tell me, what did you think of it?"

Harry blinked at the change of subject, but went with it. It was easier than thinking about making room for yet another commitment in his round of days. "It was strange. I had some idea he'd want those things, but I still can't get used to the idea of his wanting them with me."

"And why not?"

Harry shook his head impatiently. "Because I don't know why he loves me yet. He could have those things with other people. Why with me?"

"Have you asked him that?"

Harry frowned. "I don't think he'd answer me. He acts resigned to the huge gap between the way he sees me and the way I see myself. Maybe he doesn't have the words? And it's rather self-centered and childish, to ask for a list of reasons why someone else loves you. It's like asking for praise."

"You do have the right to ask for that, you know," said Vera softly. "I think you need to hear it. Others receive words of praise freely throughout their lives. You have received precious few."

Harry glanced away, feeling his cheeks heat. "But it would embarrass me further," he said.

"Why?"

Harry ground his teeth. "I suppose it's the training," he said reluctantly. He knew how Vera would react to this, and Draco, too; they saw the training as something he should never have had to endure. But enough good things came from it that Harry wanted to keep some of it. What would happen if he did ask Draco to do things like list why he loved Harry? It could propel Harry on a downhill slope that would end

with him being selfish, and the wizarding world could not afford yet another selfish wizard with Lord-level power.

“Try it,” Vera told him calmly. “If it makes you feel too uncomfortable, then ask your Malfoy to stop. But you could do worse than this as a first step. You need to understand why others love you, if they can articulate those reasons, in order to accept your bonds with them.” She smiled slightly. “Your relationships are almost all the result of conscious choice, Harry. Perhaps it should not have been that way, perhaps you should be able to have unselfconscious, completely spontaneous trust in others, but it is that way.” Harry nodded, grateful she understood. “You know the reasons that you love others. So you will need to know the reasons others love you.”

Harry nodded a second time, reluctant, but convinced she was right. He’d said as much to Draco and Snape the day his parents were sentenced. He couldn’t imagine why they’d chosen him, out of all the people in the wizarding world, to give as much trust and love as they had. Other people could have fulfilled their needs equally well, and probably better, since they wouldn’t have the problems Harry had. So he would have to not only ask them why they’d chosen him, but remain in the room while they told him.

And, hopefully, not die of embarrassment.

“And what of your progress on other fronts?” Vera asked him then. “Have you tried to relearn pleasure in taste, in warmth, in other places that you have been exiled from?”

“I don’t see the point,” said Harry, convinced that he needed to bring this up now, or he probably never would. “What does it matter what porridge tastes like to me? Or chocolate?”

Vera frowned at him for the first time. “We have spoken of this already, Harry. It matters for the same reason it matters to other people.”

“But they’re them, and I’m me,” said Harry. “I’ve had the training, and I’m sorry for it, but there it is. I think I should be putting more effort into overcoming other things than how I feel when I eat eggs.”

"I did see your Malfoy encouraging you to vary your palate," Vera murmured. "But if you think other things are more important, Harry, then of course we should concentrate on them. You will ask your Malfoy why he loves you?"

Harry winced. "Is that a command?"

"An encouragement," said Vera. "A task that even you agree is important, and which I would like you to accomplish before I speak with you again. Along with asking him why he thinks it's important for you to eat food other than porridge. Perhaps he will have an answer that changes your mind."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Harry muttered, and then blinked. He hadn't known that was in there.

Vera leaned forward, suddenly looking more like a hawk than a wren. "Why, Harry? Why should you be afraid of learning to eat as others do, to laugh as others do, to enjoy the simple pleasures in life? It is honest fear, I can see that from your eyes, and not simply the relic of the training. Why?"

Harry swallowed. "What happens if I become selfish because of it, and turn into a Dark Lord?" There, it was out in the open, no matter how stupid it sounded, and at least Vera knew what he was thinking.

Vera watched him for a long moment. Then she said, "You fear that a great deal, don't you?" Harry nodded. "Why?"

"Not just because my mother and Dumbledore thought I would become a Dark Lord," said Harry, forcing himself through the thoughts for the first time. "Not just because I can do things like swallow magic. I used to think that was it, but...I have all this magic. And the biggest characteristic that both Dumbledore and Voldemort share, besides their power, is that they want what they want, and they don't care much about what others want. I know that Lily trained me to be too unselfish, but maybe that's better than what I would turn into if I started caring too much about my wants." He stared at Vera, wondering what her response would be.

It was gentle, at least, and she certainly didn't tell him that he was stupid for thinking as he did. "There is no path absolutely free from evil, Harry," she said quietly. "Even freedom can go too far, if you were to force someone to be free against her will. There is no certainty. I can understand why you would cling to the certainties that you have, but this is simply one more thing that needs to melt and change. You are at least conscious and aware of your actions if you are trying to enjoy the small pleasures of life, while, if you are secure in the thought that you cannot possibly be selfish, you might hurt others."

Harry bowed his head and nodded. He'd seen what absolute conviction of his own rightness did to Dumbledore. It seemed strange that conviction of unselfishness could lead to that, but people could be fanatics for any cause.

Vera came to him and gently kissed his forehead. "That is all for now, Harry. Go and find your Malfoy, and ask him why he loves you. I think you will find his answers enlightening, and a good deal less embarrassing than you might suppose."

Vera would know, Harry thought, as he nodded to her and took his leave. She'd seen Draco's soul. She'd talked with him. She probably knew all the reasons for his love for Harry, even the ones he couldn't articulate.

Perversely, that just made him surer that he would be embarrassed by it. Vera had a great deal more faith in him than he did in himself.

"Harry?"

Harry looked up and blinked. He'd run straight into Draco—probably not by coincidence, since Draco had known where he would go this evening. Draco regarded him with concern, and Harry shook his head and forced a smile.

"I'm all right," he said quietly, and put his arm around Draco's shoulders.

“Do you want to tell me what she said?”

Harry hesitated, then shook his head again. “Not yet,” he added. “I will sometime.” He’d had enough embarrassment today, what with the disastrous attempt to reconcile Tybalt and Augustus, and the fact that he hadn’t even seen Digne’s knife until the man lunged at him. He really would walk around for hours with a permanently red face if Draco started telling him why he loved him.

“All right,” said Draco.

Harry closed his eyes and leaned against him, feeling Draco’s arm curl around his shoulders in turn, for one moment taking comfort in the fact that, no matter how large and loud the world outside what they shared, Draco was there. And maybe it wasn’t cheating, wasn’t hiding, to take pleasure in his company and his gentleness and his love.

Maybe.

Chapter Fifty-One: The Choir Invisible

Harry heard the screaming in his dreams.

He opened his eyes slowly at first, certain he would find himself in another vision of Voldemort torturing someone. He wondered grimly how bad the vision must have been to have broken through his Occlumency barrier—or if Voldemort had managed to find some way through the grass that sealed off their link, just to show him these special visions of pain.

But, to his surprise, though he found himself standing in a dark, misty environment he knew must be a dream, he didn't see Voldemort anywhere. He felt slick grass beneath his feet, and, a moment later, noticed the thick lash of rain that must have been falling all the time. He tilted his head up, blinking, and brushed his fringe back from his face when it tried to cling.

He made out a huge shape arcing overhead, but it refused to resolve into anything he knew—a dragon, for example, or a hippogriff. It turned in circles, maddeningly elusive, and screamed, and screamed, and screamed.

The screaming began to prick up and down Harry's spine. He could feel his magic responding to it, which was not something he would have expected. He swallowed and crossed his arms over his stomach defensively, readying a shield in case the creature should swoop down and try to rend him open. He had no idea why he was viewing this scene as yet, and no idea what shields he might be able to conjure—or what damage he might be able to take—in this dream state.

The screaming grew louder and louder, and abruptly died away, like a crack of thunder that had reached the limit of its roll. Harry squinted determinedly upward, wondering if he could see the creature now.

He made out what he thought was a spiked tail, swaying lazily above a taloned paw. Then the paw came down in his direction, powered by a leg like a crushing pillar.

Harry dropped to the ground and rolled out of the way; there was no point in trying to keep his feet on unknown terrain, made worse to balance on by the rainwater. The leg made the ground shake hard enough as it came down to throw him a few feet in the air. Harry tucked his arms around his head as he landed, and probably saved his glasses from being broken.

He scrambled into a kneel, and stared at the thing as it turned its head towards him. It was still unformed, or seemed so, in the rushing rain, but he thought he could make out glinting eyes and teeth.

There was a familiarity about the creature, but the only thing Harry could really compare it to was a dragon, and he knew of no dragons who sounded like they were screaming. Dragons sang, in Acies's terms, and roared, in everyone else's. And he really should have recognized a dragon's shape, after such close acquaintance with them during the Triwizard Tournament.

He tried to calm down, and to make his voice calm when he spoke. "What is your name? What is your kindred? Do you need help? I am vates, and I think that I might be able to—"

The creature screamed at him, its breath deep and rotten with various horrid smells. Harry choked, and went with the blast of sound that bore him further into the dark place, wherever they were—it felt flat and grassy, at least. He wouldn't question the dragon, the thing, if it didn't want to be questioned.

He hit something, probably a boulder, and this time came up with a shield sparking around him. The creature snaked a long neck towards him, bending at odd angles. It paused when it saw the shield, and Harry saw something in the hovering golden eyes—he still couldn't see the face that supposedly encased them—which might have been doubt.

Harry switched to Parseltongue, concentrating on the snakelike curves of the neck. If it was a serpent of some kind, then of course it wouldn't have understood English and his offer to be vates to it. "Are you hurt? Do you need help? What are you? Why have you brought me here?"

The creature held absolutely still. Harry waited, holding his breath until he couldn't do it any longer and let it out with a whoosh.

As if that were the signal it'd been waiting for, the creature lashed out, smashing him in the side with its heavily muscled neck. Harry felt himself fly over the obstruction at his back and land in another grassy path. He gasped in pain, and then again when his hand flew out to catch him too late and he hit his face in the mud.

He sat up, swiping at his mud-covered glasses, until he realized it was useless and he had to pull them off. The creature was right in front of him when he could see again, its mouth open to reveal teeth longer than his arms.

Harry concentrated desperately on trying to wake up.

The creature drew in its breath and screamed, even as the dream shattered.

The scream pursued Harry into waking light, provided by Fawkes, who sat near his head on the pillow and chirped in concern. It took Harry a long moment to realize that, rather than the creature screaming into his ear, he was hearing thunder. He shuddered and turned to face the phoenix, stroking his feathers and breathing harshly.

Wait.

He felt pain when he inhaled and exhaled, not just the terror of the dream. Harry pulled up his pyjama shirt and moved to the side, so that he could see his own ribs in Fawkes's light. He grimaced when he saw bruises, already turning purple and green like night-blooming flowers.

He listened critically to his own breath and felt his own pain, then shook his head. No, he was fairly sure that he didn't have any broken ribs. He'd felt that when Quirrell cursed him with Crucio in his and Connor's first year, and this pain wasn't as sharp.

“What the fuck,” he murmured, for lack of anything better to say.

He sat where he was for a time, rubbing Fawkes’s head absently, shifting so that his movements wouldn’t disturb Argutus, who lay curled up beside him with his head on his tail. He searched his mind for references to a creature who could do this, and came up with nothing. There were, Merlin knew, dangerous and wonderful fantastic beasts in the world, especially ones that Harry didn’t know much about, but he had not heard even a rumor of one like this.

And it had seemed to have a personal enmity against him, as though he had done something that hurt it. That screaming—

He was still hearing the screaming. Or something like it.

Harry closed his eyes, concentrating. The screaming faded as he listened, though, faded into the thunder that shook the castle.

The thunder.

Harry felt his eyes flare open. The creature was connected to the storms. It had to be. It had been raining in the dream, hadn’t it? And the screaming had faded into the thunder when he woke. Perhaps this was Voldemort’s plan, to conjure a beast to hunt him in his dreams. It seemed indirect and wasteful, but then, Voldemort had never made sensible plans.

There was only one way Harry really knew of to get answers. He would have to go outside, which he hadn’t been since the storms started, and try to sense what magic might be stalking him.

He slid across the bed, wincing as twinges from his ribs announced themselves, and made it to his curtains without trouble. When he opened them, though, he jumped. Draco stood there, his eyebrows raised.

“And you were going where?” he asked.

“Just outside,” Harry said, flushing and not understanding why. It wasn’t like he had been doing anything dangerous, after all. The

beast that had come stalking him in his dreams wasn't his fault. "I think I might have a clue to the magic powering the storms, whatever Voldemort is going to do on Midwinter that's stirring the weather up so much. But I haven't been close enough to the rain and the lightning to see if there really is magic behind it. I should recognize his magic, if it's there." And that would explain why my magic in the dream responded, too. I am his magical heir, and it might have sensed the familiarity of his power. "So I'm going outside to see what I can feel."

"Alone?"

Harry gave him an annoyed glance. "Well, yes. It's just a walk on the grounds, Draco, and I thought you were asleep."

"You woke me up with your little groans and complaints," said Draco. Harry was glad that he'd dropped his pyjama top in time to hide the bruises. "And there's no such thing as a little walk on the grounds with you, Harry. You'll find a mad murderer lurking with a knife under the Whomping Willow, or one of Hagrid's pets escaped and trying to find a way to get into the castle. I'm coming with you." He turned to fetch one of his cloaks, presumably, from his trunk.

"Draco," Harry whined, and knew he was whining. But it was bad enough that his own sleep was disturbed and he had suspicions of Voldemort's magic riding the storms. He didn't want Draco exposed to either annoyance or danger.

Draco looked at him over his shoulder. "You could always do the sensible thing and stay inside, Harry."

"I should know tonight," said Harry, and decided that he would have to tell Draco the truth to get past the skeptical expression on his face. "I had a dream or a vision, one of the two. Not about Voldemort," he added hastily, when Draco's face tightened. "But a creature hunted me, one I've never seen before. Its cry faded into the thunder when I woke. I thought I should at least investigate the connection between it and the storms."

"Did it hurt you?"

Harry kept his face blank with an effort. "Just a bit."

Draco hissed at him under his breath. "We're going to Madam Pomfrey when we're done here," he said, and flung his cloak over his head. Harry knew it had enchantments to make it impervious to rain and snow, and took some comfort in the fact that at least Draco wouldn't get wet.

"I don't need to go to Madam Pomfrey," he said, and knew that he was whining again. Somehow his simple little adventure had turned into this. Harry didn't know why this always happened to him. In first year, he had slipped out after Quirrell into the Forbidden Forest and seen him kill a unicorn and drink its blood, and no one had objected to that.

"Unless you can manage to heal yourself, yes, you do," said Draco, and held out the edge of his cloak. "Come on, beneath here. I know that the magic on yours isn't as good."

Harry scowled at him as he tied a pair of robes on over his pyjamas and trudged over to him. "And, of course, the fact that it'll give you a chance to hold me doesn't factor at all into your plans," he muttered.

Draco grinned at him and slipped an arm around his waist as Harry stepped under the cloak. Luckily, the arm gripped him beneath the ring of bruises that went around his ribs, and so Harry didn't need to wince and pull away. "I wouldn't be Slytherin if I admitted to something like that, Harry," he said innocently.

Harry chose to cast a Disillusionment Charm over them instead of replying. Snape often patrolled the dungeons at night, and though it was probably too late for the prefects to be out, there was always the chance of running into someone else, too.

Draco's hold never varied as they crept up the dungeon corridors and towards the front doors, even when they were on the stairs and it was awkward to maneuver with Draco's arm around his waist. Harry tried a few pointed glances and half-tugs away to no avail. Besides, he soon had enough to do, keeping his breath from rasping through his

lungs in pain. He had to get outside and see what was happening with the storms, and if Draco saw how badly he'd been bruised, there was the chance that he wouldn't let that happen.

They reached the entrance hall. Harry could hear the storm much better now. The thunder sounded like someone being tortured, so loud that he wondered how anyone in Gryffindor Tower or Ravenclaw Tower got any sleep. He would have noticed dark circles beneath Connor's eyes, though, so he suspected that McGonagall and Flitwick had cast charms on the outer walls to damp the sound.

"This way," Draco murmured, and propelled Harry across the entrance hall towards the doors.

"I know it's that way," said Harry, but didn't try to walk the distance on his own. It wouldn't work, and would just prove embarrassing, so he might as well go along with what Draco wanted to do.

Halfway to the doors, they met a reflected shimmer of movement that indicated someone else was using a Disillusionment Charm. Harry raised his eyebrows, and then decided he had to at least know who it was. Finite Incantatem, he thought, concentrating on the shimmer.

The spell broke and revealed Hermione creeping intently towards the staircase, her face set. Draco drew breath for an exclamation, but Harry clamped an arm around his waist in return and squeezed, making him do nothing more than huff. Hermione stopped and looked around in suspicion, but obviously didn't see them. A moment later, she noticed she was visible, squeaked, and recast the Charm on herself.

Draco waited until they heard the faint sound of her footsteps on the staircase, and then whispered, "Why did you stop me from saying anything, Harry? That's prime taunting material, right there! You know she's on her way back from the Hufflepuff common room—"

"And that's why you're not to tease her," Harry whispered furiously. "How would you like it if we were in different Houses and someone caught you on the way back to the dungeons?"

Draco shook his head. “Wouldn’t have happened. We were both always going to be Slytherins.”

Harry gave up. Sometimes, Draco was impossible. “This way,” he said instead, and this time, he was the one to lead the way to the doors.

They crept out through them, and into the heart of the storm.

Harry felt the magic at once, curling like a snake on the back of the thunder, clenching its talons around the lightning, split and scattered and sparkling in every drop of rain that fell to earth. The wards woven into Hogwarts’s stones had kept him from feeling it before; that was the only explanation for the intense difference between inside and outside. Harry put out a shaky hand, gripping at nothing, only to feel Draco take it and hold it.

The wind picked up, and Harry realized he had been at least partially wrong. The beast’s cry wasn’t just thunder. It was the swift flow of the air, building to gale force, a more varied sound than screaming, but still incredibly loud. He shuddered. There was a mind behind that wind and that thunder, and the mind did not care about hurting others. It would not stalk them out of some sadistic need to torture, but it would sweep them out of the way without even noticing them, as casually as a wizard might step on an ant.

“Harry?” Draco’s voice sounded far away, and not only because the storm was roaring like a wild thing.

Harry edged a few steps further away from the entrance, letting the doors of Hogwarts drop shut behind him. He had to get closer to the storm, had to find the answer to this nagging sense of familiarity. There was—there was something more than sentience here, something more than magic. He’d felt it before, he knew what it was, but he couldn’t identify it now. Why not?

“Harry!”

Harry felt rain shove his fringe away from his face like harsh fingers, and realized he’d stepped out from under the cloak. He didn’t think he

could care. There was a pulling force here that he'd only felt once before: with the singing, many-legged creature imprisoned in Grimmauld Place. This wasn't the same song, exactly—that one was far more musical, without the rough edges of wind and thunder—but this was a song. If he could hear the words, if he could make out the notes, then he would know who was singing, and he thought that was important.

He reached out slowly towards the magic, his own power writhing around his body in inchoate streams of light.

Then the storm noticed him.

Harry felt the focus of the great mind sharpen and point at him, like an arrowhead. Still, he couldn't find it in himself to feel frightened. He was only vaguely aware of Draco hammering on the light behind him; his magic had tightened, forming a barrier between them.

Harry looked up.

The lightning came down.

He felt it hit him like a bite, like a clamping of jaws around his waist. He snapped sideways, once, and every muscle in his body rang. The song he heard changed to a deepening croon, and then the magic draped over him, a mingling of the electric shock he would have expected to feel and hundreds of small, pinching, champing mouths. They were trying to drain his magic, and Harry, stumbling, dazed, was almost of a mind to let them.

Then he heard a hiss close to his ankles, and dazzling light flared above him, to the accompaniment of Fawkes's indignant voice.

The song turned into a hiss, considerably less pleasant to listen to than what Harry recognized as Argutus's insults in Parseltongue. The magic drew back from Harry and lurched up, coiling like a cobra, looking from Argutus to Fawkes as if wondering who it should hit first.

Fawkes dived at it, his talons widespread, his song fearless. The magic turned, its decision obviously made.

Harry woke.

He flung out his hand, and the light that had been keeping Draco away from him turned into a blade that carved the darkness facing him. The darkness writhed and screamed, more in annoyance and anger than pain, Harry thought, and jumped away from him. Now it had almost the form of the beast in his dream, though considerably smaller, bending its neck back towards him, the golden eyes and the long, sharp teeth gleaming in the midst of a body he couldn't see very well.

"Go away," Harry said, and heard Fawkes strengthen his words with a warble. Fire streamed from the phoenix, turning the raindrops to steam before they landed. Argutus was coiled around his ankle, still hissing in agitation, and the darkness watched all of them with wild, contemptuous eyes. "I will not allow you to harm them, whatever you might do to me."

The creature continued watching him for a moment. Then it laughed, a rolling, deep belly laugh that said it could wait for a time when Harry wouldn't escape it, and turned and sprang for the clouds. Wings like wet patches on stone opened around it, and beat once, and then it was gone, dissipated into the roaring, stalking force of a power that, Harry realized, he had felt before.

It wasn't any plan of Voldemort's stirring up the storms, after all. This was the wild Dark, the same force that walked the night skies on Walpurgis Night.

And Midwinter was coming up—longest night of the year, a night without a moon.

Harry felt his mouth tighten. This was worse news than Voldemort, by far.

He shook his head and stooped down so that Argutus could crawl up his left arm. Fawkes landed on his shoulder, both balance and voice unsteady for a moment. His head ducked to brush against Harry's

cheek, and Harry winced. The feathers would leave a faint burn. Fawkes had been worried.

Someone else had been, too, and Draco pulled Harry firmly against him, murmuring, "I don't know whether I should kiss you or punch you, to tell you the truth. Or take you to Madam Pomfrey and make sure that she feeds you enough Dreamless Sleep to last you for the next three days."

Harry winced and tugged himself backward as Draco's arms came in contact with the bruises. He ignored Draco's hurt expression for a moment to feel at the edges of his magic. At last, he nodded, satisfied. If the wild Dark had permanently swallowed any of his power, he really couldn't tell. He felt fine.

Well, except for the bruises, and the fact that he'd put his life in danger again without meaning to, and the wild worry in Argutus's voice as he loosed a stream of admonitions, and Draco's silence that throbbed like a toothache.

"I'm sorry," Harry said quietly, turning to him. "But that was the creature from the dream I had before we came out here. It hit me along the ribs with its neck, and when I woke, I found that I carried the bruises."

Draco's expression changed, but to one not that much better. "And when were you planning to tell me about this?"

"Um. After I found out about the storms?"

Draco closed his eyes and shook his head. "I hope it was worth it, Harry, because you frightened me to death." He kept his head turned away, and Harry suspected he knew why when his voice was choked up a moment later. "I thought you were going to die, damn you."

Harry thought of saying that Draco should be used to that by now, but kept the words behind his teeth. Now wasn't a time for jokes. "I know," he said quietly. "I'm sorry."

“I’ll get it through your head someday that your life is worth more than the knowledge you get by risking it,” Draco breathed. Harry wasn’t sure if it was a promise or a prayer. “Someday.”

“I hope so,” Harry said. It wasn’t that he liked worrying people, he thought, as he told Draco where to put his arm so that he could support Harry into the school but not press on any of the bruises. He didn’t even particularly enjoy risking his life, unless he was doing it in a plan he was fairly sure would work out and could anticipate and exult in the adrenaline rush.

But—well, sometimes risking his life was the only way to learn anything. And what he had learned tonight had been worth the risk.

Of course, he still didn’t necessarily know what it meant, what had stirred the wild Dark up so, and why it had chosen this Midwinter to strike when it normally only grew this active around Walpurgis. He knew someone who would know, though.

“You’re staying here for the night, Mr. Pot—Harry.” Madam Pomfrey, her hair half-wild from sleep, had woken up when Draco insistently called for her, but she wasn’t very happy about it. She’d run her wand over his ribs, and then looked even less happy. “You have a few internal injuries, easily cured with potions, and rest.” She jabbed her wand at him as if she would cast a sleep spell right there. “And your ribs are fractured, though not broken. You’re going to sleep, and then you’ll stay in bed until at least noon tomorrow.”

“But it was sleep that caused me to get the injuries in the first place,” Harry protested, ignoring Draco’s little satisfied noise. “How can you be sure that I won’t have another dream like that?”

Madam Pomfrey gave a sharp little sigh, a white triangle of skin appearing around her nostrils. “I am sure of nothing where you are concerned, Harry,” she muttered. “But Dreamless Sleep at least seems like a reasonable precaution, and I will set a spell to warn me if you manifest any unexpected wounds.”

Harry squirmed. This was exactly what he'd hoped to avoid. "Can I wait half an hour to take the Potion, Madam Pomfrey?" he asked, and smiled dazzlingly at her. "I have to talk to someone first."

"You are not firecalling anyone at this time of night," the matron began.

"It's not a firecall," said Harry. "Just a spell that I can use which contacts them right away. I promise, I won't take more than half an hour." Unless she changes her mind at the end of the half hour, he thought hopefully. He hated Dreamless Sleep. It always made him slower to react in the morning, and in the middle of a War, a split second's reaction time could make the difference between life and death.

Madam Pomfrey stared harder at him. "You're not going to take the Potion unless I agree to this, are you?" she asked.

Harry painted a contrite expression across his face. "No. Sorry."

The matron shook her head heavily and went to fetch the vial of dark potion from a cabinet on the far wall. "Half an hour, Harry," she said, as she set it down on the table beside the bed as heavily as a troll had ever dropped a club. "And you'll take these potions now." She held out what Harry recognized as healing potions for internal injuries and fractured bones. He nodded and drank them, wishing absently that whoever had invented these had looked into making them taste sweeter.

"I should go back to sleep," said Madam Pomfrey, and looked fiercely at Draco. Harry expected her to send him back to the Slytherin common room, but she said only, "You'll make sure that he takes the Dreamless Sleep, Mr. Malfoy? And then stay here, in a separate bed?"

Draco flushed, but nodded. "You can count on me, Madam," he said.

"Good," said Madam Pomfrey, and glared one final time at Harry, as if she could make him safer by looking. Then she went back to her private room in the back of the hospital wing.

Harry sighed as he saw the look on Draco's face. He was no doubt taking the Dreamless Sleep now. But Draco appeared content to wait for at least the same period of time that the matron had said he could have, so Harry touched his left wrist and whispered the communication spell.

A moment later, Henrietta Bulstrode, sounding very awake for this time of night, said, "Yes, vates? What can I do for you?"

Harry shrugged his discomfort off—just because vates sounded like a title when she said it didn't mean she meant it that way—and pressed forward in his task. "I need to know what you know about the wild Dark," he said. "Other than Thomas Rhangnara, I think you have the largest library, and he's busy researching ways to break past Ariadne's Web right now."

"Of course," said Henrietta, not even asking why he needed it. "I know a good deal about it without even looking in a book, vates; some of my ancestors once tried to harness the magic at Walpurgis, before they gave it up as a bad idea. What have you learned about it?"

"It's in motion now," said Harry. "These storms that are plaguing the British Isles come from it. It confronted me in my dreams tonight, and then when I stepped out into the storm. I think it plans to strike at Midwinter, when the moon will be dark."

There was a long moment of stillness. Then Henrietta said softly, "Someone has roused the Dark, then. I think it must be the Dark Lord, and not you. Powerful wizards draw its attention, but you haven't done anything to actively irritate it, have you?"

"No," said Harry, ignoring the way Fawkes chirped on his shoulder. The phoenix had a different opinion, but Harry didn't have to let that influence his response to Henrietta. "But I was under the impression that it could strike back any time it wanted, and it would, too, whether or not someone had actively irritated it."

“No,” said Henrietta. “It is above us. Most of the time, it plays in the spaces between the stars and ignores us. Walpurgis draws its attention, and so does the proclamation of a new Dark Lord, but very little else. However, I believe that Voldemort tried to capture it this past Walpurgis, did he not?”

Harry swore beneath his breath. “He did,” he said, ignoring Draco’s raised eyebrow. “I suppose I thought it would take its vengeance before now.”

“No,” said Henrietta calmly. “It will wait for Midwinter, the time when the world is furthest from light—and the blackening of the moon will add to its power. It means to play, I think, or it would not have come hunting you. My family has a story of an ancestor facing it one Midwinter in the form of a mighty storm. That storm might have destroyed Britain, but the Dark lost interest and wandered away. This time, I do not think we can count on that.”

“Definitely not.” Harry shuddered at the memory of the wild Dark’s golden eyes, very interested in him. It had obviously tried to take his magic just because it could. It might want to punish Voldemort, but from what Henrietta was saying, it wouldn’t at all object to killing whatever was in its path. “Is there any way to tell where the brunt of the storm will fall? Or is it just wherever Voldemort is going to be that night?”

“No,” said Henrietta. “The Dark has a sense of ceremony when it comes hunting like this—as you’ve surmised for yourself, or it would have taken its vengeance already, without the buildup to Midwinter. It intends for this to be more than a simple vengeance-taking. It wants attention, rather like a spoiled child. That is the reason it has reached out to you, vates, beyond your magic, I think. In my ancestor’s story, it chose Stonehenge, both because that was the place he’d tried to capture it and because the most powerful wizard in those days was a druid who loved the stones. It will almost certainly find it amusing to choose a place that connects you and Voldemort, a place where something powerful and Dark happened.”

Harry felt himself freeze, and Draco shift beside him. He forced the words past his tight throat. "Where something powerful and Dark happened? Or where something almost happened?"

Henrietta's voice turned uncertain for the first time. "That, I will have to look up. It's been a long time since I studied the books on the character and temper of the wild Dark. My family's stories always served me well for most of my needs. But I think it will choose the Darkest occurrence it can, and that means a successful ritual, say, would please it better than one that failed to happen."

That eliminates the Chamber of Secrets and the Shrieking Shack, then.

"Vates?" Henrietta's voice was concerned. "Do you think you know where the storm will come down?"

Harry coughed, and managed to speak again. "I do," he said. "There are really only two places it could. The house in Godric's Hollow where Voldemort gave me my curse scar, or—" He made himself say it. "The graveyard where I lost my hand."

Draco leaned against him. Fawkes crooned. Argutus lifted his head. "I think I know how to control my visions now," he said. "That's why I spent the time away from you that I did, working on them. I can show you, if I can just concentrate."

"I am sorry, vates," Henrietta's voice murmured. "It will almost certainly be the graveyard. The giving of the curse scar involved Dark magic, yes, but that was longer ago. And would I be right in saying that you do not personally remember it?"

"Right," Harry whispered.

"Again, I will have to look up confirmation, but from what I know of the wild Dark, if it's decided to make you a piece in its game, it will want to hurt you as much as possible. And the graveyard holds more and worse memories for you. Yes, it will be there."

“All right,” Harry breathed. He managed to kick his brain past the memories it wanted to show him. “Then I’ll find out where Tom Riddle was buried. He used his father’s bone in the ritual to revive himself, along with my blood. Whatever graveyard it is, we’ll find it, and we’ll know where to go and block the storm.”

“I would say that you cannot block the storm, but I know that you must try,” said Henrietta. “I will go to my library and see if I can learn anything about the wild Dark that might help, or might contradict what we know now. Farewell, vates. Try to rest.”

“Farewell,” Harry echoed blankly, and then he felt the spell ease and vanish.

He closed his eyes and counted to ten, in Mermish, in his head. The memories, which had gripped him like the jaws of the lightning around his waist, slowly eased the same way the spell had. Then he could let himself feel Fawkes on his shoulder again, and Argutus coiled tightly around his left wrist, and—

And Draco holding the vial of Dreamless Sleep Potion to his lips.

“Draco!” he tried to say, but choked. He ended up swallowing most of the potion, resigned to it. He didn’t think it had been quite half an hour, but he was in no position to object. Draco eased him back so that he could lie on the pillows.

“Sorry,” he whispered into Harry’s ear. “But you’ve just had a pretty hard shock. You deserve a while to rest after this, I think.”

Harry closed his eyes. He had a few moments before the potion, swirling in the center of his mind like a maelstrom, covered the whole thing. He murmured sleepily and shifted position.

“Harry?” Draco sounded as if he were on the other side of an ocean. “Can you block the storm at all, do you think? I thought no mortal wizard could stop the wild Dark.”

“I don’t know,” Harry murmured. “But just because it’s impossible doesn’t mean I can get out of trying.”

Draco was silent then. Harry felt his hand for just a moment more before the potion carried him away. The last thought he remembered was absurd gratitude to the wild Dark. This was a problem so overwhelming that he couldn’t feel bad about devoting all his efforts towards solving it, at least until Midwinter arrived.

Draco knew Harry had fallen asleep almost instantly—Dreamless Sleep always affected him that way after the initial pause—but he stayed there, staring down into his face, fighting the temptation to curl up in the same bed as Harry after all. Only the remembrance of Harry’s injuries, including the bruises flaring along his ribs like the marks of clutching fingers, kept him from doing it. He might jostle Harry in his sleep and hurt him further.

Merlin, Harry. He closed his eyes, but then the vision of Harry caught and tossed by the lightning was there. The lightning had grown around him, wild and weird and disgusting like nothing Draco had seen before, sucking as if it would pull Harry’s skin off his bones. The fear had struck Draco like a blade, the idea that he might lose Harry never so present as it had been in that moment.

Now, worse than the fear was the despair. No matter what I can do, I can never keep him safe.

Draco took a deep breath and sat back in his chair, and made himself face the thought. It was one of the things Vera had spoken to him about, and her gentle words rushed past his ears like the sigh of a breeze.

“You love your Harry fiercely enough to go through any storms beside him, I can see that. What you must know now is that the storms are unlikely to end. You dream of a haven where you can live with him and be untroubled, but that will not happen. Your Harry will forever cast himself into danger’s path. He does not know the meaning of relaxation, he is only slowly learning the meaning of pleasure, and he will never learn to look aside from the suffering of others. You must decide if you can bear that, and the wounds it will put on your heart.”

Draco shut his eyes. He had scoffed a bit at Vera's pronouncement, because while he knew she could see souls, she couldn't predict the future. She couldn't know that Harry would never consent to say he had done enough and retreat from the world.

Now, Draco had to admit that knowledge of the basis of someone's character could be a kind of prediction, if you knew them well enough. And Vera knew them both well enough.

Could he bear this?

The answer was there, though, before he asked the question. Yes. He was too deeply tangled up in Harry to pull back now, without ripping apart half of what he was. Oh, he could heal from those wounds—Vera would probably say that; his father, who did not believe in needing people, would certainly say that—but he didn't want to. So, yes, he could bear this, because he must.

So he had to decide how he was going to bear it.

Draco narrowed his eyes and pushed his hair back from his forehead. Madam Pomfrey had cast warming and drying charms on them, but Draco still thought he could feel the pressure of the rain, and the wind, and the eyes of the lightning-creature that had hurt Harry. The pressure didn't make him weary, or frustrated with Harry, or even very frightened. It just pissed him off.

I am going to bear this, but not like a little suffering wife, or a best friend dragged along against his will. I am going to bear this the way I want to bear it. Harry knows what I want. I won't settle for less, because I shouldn't have to. I deserve what I want from him. And I'm going to make a place for myself in the midst of all the storms and dragons and oceans and Dark Lords he has to face.

I was here first. They can sod off. I can bear this because I know I'm the most important person in the world to him. If I'm not, then I'll get upset, but not before. Harry might help other people, but he's going to share his life with me. And I'm going to be beside him, not behind him.

As spiky and snarly as he felt, Draco wasn't sure he'd be able to sleep, but, surprisingly, slumber descended the moment he curled up in the hospital bed across from Harry's, despite the memory of the storm and the soft light shining from Fawkes. He supposed, as the ground slid out from under him and tipped him down into the abyss, that this was what the sleep of the just felt like.

Surely no one in the world can be as right as I am at this moment.

Chapter Fifty-Two: Harry Plays the “Boy-Who-Lived”

“You cannot mean to do this.” Snape seemed to be under the impression that if he said that often enough, then Harry would wake up from the spell Snape seemed to be convinced he was under, and decide not to do this.

“But I do.” Harry looked aside from the conjured mirror and studied his guardian over his shoulder. “I admit, stepping into the storm is a risk, but it has to be in public, or I can’t trust that the warning will get to everyone in time.”

“And you think they will listen to you.” That was flat.

“I do,” Harry repeated. He looked again in the mirror, then gave a shrug, irritated at himself. He’d wanted to look appropriately warrior-like, so that those who listened to his press conference would take his warning seriously, but other than the grim expression on his face—that was no problem—he had to admit he didn’t know what would make him look that way. He would be speaking to a mixed audience of Light and Dark wizards, too, which further complicated the problem. In the end, he’d gone for ordinary dark robes, though he’d left the Slytherin tie off, so that he wouldn’t look like a schoolboy. He’d also bared his left arm, both because he liked the symbolic gesture of revealing he didn’t have the Dark Mark and to emphasize his missing hand. If he could remind his audience that he’d lost some of himself to this war, they would be more likely to listen.

“I wish you did not have to do this,” Snape muttered behind him. “Not only the storms might kill you. An Order of the Phoenix member with a knife—” Harry hoped he hadn’t jumped at that, since Snape still didn’t know about Diggle “—a Death Eater with the Killing Curse on her lips, or someone determined to avenge Dumbledore’s imprisonment would do just as well.”

“I know,” said Harry. “But I’ve explained the reasons why.” He had, multiple times, including the reasons that Scrimgeour had added to his list when he first contacted the Minister and asked if he thought the press conference was a good idea. Snape was stubborn, but he

was also, in this case, helpless to stop the conference from going ahead.

“You have. And I will be at your shoulder.” That alone seemed to give Snape any confidence.

Harry just nodded and got ready to leave Snape’s private rooms for the entrance hall. He’d tried to get Snape to stay here, since there really were Death Eaters hunting him, but Snape had just looked at him, and that was that.

They met Draco outside the door; he’d fussed himself into readiness in their bedroom. Harry almost envied him his deep green robes with the Malfoy crest, for all that they looked uncomfortable. They proclaimed Draco’s status and allegiances clearly and undeniably. Lacking a last name and a Declaration for either Dark or Light, Harry’s options were limited.

Of course, sending a mixed message is the only truthful thing I can do. I just hope that it doesn’t dilute the impact of that message.

“Ready?” Draco looked at Harry’s bared left arm, started to frown for a moment, then seemed to catch on to the gesture and nodded. Then he frowned anyway. “Do you think I should show my left arm as well?”

“It’d be a shame to ruin the robes,” said Harry, less because he thought that was true than because he wanted no more fussing. It was already two-o’clock, and the press conference was at three. They had to get off Hogwarts grounds and then Apparate to the vicinity of the Ministry. Then, no doubt, the press of people would hold them up before they could get to the stage where the Minister had arranged for them to have the conference. “Let’s leave.”

Draco exchanged a look with Snape that Harry didn’t bother to translate, since he knew it would be uncomplimentary to him. He led the way out of the dungeons, only to pause when he saw his brother waiting near the front doors, tugging at the collar of his own formal robes as if they constricted his breathing.

“Connor?” Harry could not imagine why Connor wanted to come. He’d offered his brother the opportunity to attend the press conference with him already, and Connor had quietly refused, saying that he thought people would get confused if the former Boy-Who-Lived appeared with the current one. “Have you changed your mind?”

“Not exactly,” said Connor. “But I just thought of something I should do, and this is the best chance to do it. I want as many people to know as possible.” His face was pale, but determined.

Draco made a little growling noise. Harry knew what he was thinking. Your brother shouldn’t take over the spotlight. Of course he would be trying to do that. Just like a Gryffindor.

Harry spoke quickly, to cut the impending tantrum off. “You’re welcome, of course, Connor.” He glanced at Snape. “You can Side-Along Apparate Draco, and I’ll Apparate my brother?”

Snape said nothing for long moments, and Harry wondered if he would send Connor back to Gryffindor Tower after all. The two of them were getting along a bit better in their practice dueling sessions, but it was still nothing to brag about.

“That would be acceptable,” said Snape at last, and Harry relaxed. He would have to seriously reconsider having another of these conferences in the future. The sheer amount of fuss involved in them was making him allergic to them, and he hadn’t even had one yet, properly.

They stepped out into the rain, and Harry tensed. It had been a week since the storm’s attack. That didn’t seem to make any difference to his jumpiness, though, especially now that he could hear the song and feel the magic behind the rain and thunder. His brain kept reminding him that they were now only ten days from Midwinter, and that all their preparations to counter the wild Dark’s stroke might not be enough.

But nothing hit them. Snape cast Impervious Charms on their cloaks to keep the rain from soaking them through, and shields above their heads to keep them from being pelted. Harry nodded; he should have

thought of that himself. He was going to arrive in public with his hair wild as it was, thanks to its refusal to obey a comb. He would at least like to avoid having it soaked and windblown.

“This way.”

Snape led them towards the road to Hogsmeade. Harry found himself walking between Draco and his brother. Draco maintained a silence no doubt born of a superiority complex. Harry knew for a fact that he hadn't been in a public situation like this very often, either, but he acted as if he had, and that could make all the difference. Pureblood rituals were good at training a wizard or witch to maintain an uncaring attitude.

Connor, of course, chewed on his lip and did such a good job of messing his own hair up that the wind didn't need to help. Harry opened his mouth to say something, then shut it again and shook his head. Connor was nervous enough about—whatever this was. He assumed his brother didn't want him to know what it was, or he would have said something already. Scolding him would only raise his nerves.

Draco, of course, didn't know how to leave well enough alone. “Quit burrowing, Potter,” he said, in a distant, lofty tone that almost perfectly imitated Lucius's. “If your thoughts aren't already in your head, pawing at your hair won't help you find them.”

Connor, just about to run his fingers through his hair again, flushed and dropped his hand to his side. “You don't know anything about what I'm doing, Malfoy,” he snapped.

“No, I don't.” Draco was now wearing the politely neutral expression that Harry suspected both the elder Malfoys favored for boring dinner parties. “Why don't you tell me, and then I'll have some idea?”

“I would, if I thought that you could keep—”

“Enough.”

Snape's pointedly single word put an end to the conversation, and after that they walked in silence. Harry had thought he'd be grateful for it, but he found the silence sharpening the thoughts in his head, sending them tumbling into one another, revolving in odd patterns. He wondered, as he had since he'd sent the letters to Skeeter and Scrimgeour asking about this, if it were really the right thing to do. The Ministry, after all, could have announced the facts about the wild Dark and told people to stay inside on Midwinter night as easily as Harry.

But people were used to ignoring the Ministry, treating their announcements as a bit of a joke; almost a year of Scrimgeour in office hadn't yet changed that. And a secondhand report that Harry planned to fight the storms wouldn't command as much credibility as a proclamation from Harry himself. He badly wanted to give what reassurance he could. By now, most of wizarding Britain would know these weren't natural storms—if only because it was the eleventh of December and no snow had fallen yet, only this constant, steady rain—and Harry would rather they realize the true cause than panic.

And know someone is doing something about it. There's that, too.

Harry shifted restlessly, which jostled Argutus, who was curled around his left arm and under his robe, the only concession he'd made to the chill of the air and the rain. He slid his head out the slit in the sleeve, and flicked his tongue at Harry. "Everything will be all right," he said. "I showed you in the vision."

Harry managed a tense smile. It was true that Argutus had managed to conjure a vision of what looked like Britain, and maybe even part of Europe, with a tracery of light across it, surrounded by intense darkness. Harry had given the description to his allies, in the hopes that someone might know something about it. Augustus Starrise had answered at once, saying excitedly that it resembled some cooperative rituals he knew of. Now he was organizing the Light wizards who were either allied to Harry or owed his Light allies favors. He was confident they would help Harry to resist the storm when it came.

Harry wasn't as confident. Argutus's scales showed what might happen, like a prophecy, rather than what would happen, with the sharpness and clarity of a necromancer's vision. He hoped they were doing the right thing, but he couldn't be sure. And none of his allies had felt the sheer screaming power of the wild Dark as he had. It had carried him like a child when they struck back against Voldemort at Walpurgis. It could do the same thing now, especially when it was angry and wanted to—play with Harry.

Henrietta had contacted him several times over the course of the last week, but had been unable to add anything to her original guess about why the Dark was after Harry. It wanted his attention, and it wanted to eat his magic if it could—Harry had seen that much in the lightning attack—and it could be miffed for its own reasons. Henrietta had argued that its motive mattered less than the fact that it was apparently drawing Harry into the dance it was doing with Voldemort, the same way that the other Dark storm had drawn both her ancestor and a powerful druid into a dance. Harry had reluctantly agreed.

Even if it wasn't pulling at me, I would still have to face it. I'm the only one who might possibly harness enough power to stop it.

He shivered. Snape gave him a sharp glance. "Do you need me to renew the charms on your cloak, Harry?" he asked.

Harry shook his head. "I'm fine," he whispered. He did feel a faint chill from the rain, in fact, but only now that Snape had called his attention to it. He felt a far greater chill from the fact that he would be going up against one of the mightiest forces of magic in the world, and that he was powerful, and backed by allies, but without the sheer strength the Dark had casually displayed to him.

And it would be stronger than ever come Midwinter, with the moon, which somewhat lessened its influence now, gone.

Harry shook his head and lengthened his stride. He had to stop worrying about what might happen. There was only what he could plan until he actually entered the battle, and then what would happen. He would control as much of that as he could, but he remembered

Lily telling him that battle plans only lasted until the battle began. Then they shattered, always.

I'll do what I can. And right now, that's warn the wizarding public about what's coming.

Above him, the thunder screamed. It sounded smug.

"Welcome, Harry." Scrimgeour was rising to his feet, his face grave and his yellow eyes more intent than Harry had ever seen them. This was the Minister's public face, he thought, the one he would don in times of war and natural disaster. "Thank you for coming. I think this is the best solution."

Harry nodded. He was somewhat astonished the Minister had seen him in the midst of the dozen Aurors who'd met them at the Apparition point and escorted them to the platform. Perhaps Scrimgeour just knew he had to be in there somewhere.

He climbed the steps of the platform, feeling Impervious Charms and wards part for him and then slam back together again. He wondered, half-humorously, if there was one to prevent rotten vegetables or saliva from hitting him. The wizarding public in older times had sometimes been demonstrative.

He scanned the faces of the wizards already waiting and watching. The reporters were closest to the stage, of course; there was the flash of Skeeter's glasses, and several bursting lights registered the presence of photographers. Next to Skeeter was a woman with severely pulled-back hair and a practiced sneer, who seemed to spend most of her time sneering at Skeeter. Harry suspected she was Melinda Honeywhistle, Skeeter's most frequent rival for the front page of the Prophet. Next to her stood a somber man, and next to him a wizard in the tattiest robes Harry had ever seen, and then more men and women, professional or unprofessional as their papers, or perhaps their reputations, dictated. Harry didn't know any others by sight.

He knew the wizards and witches gathered beyond the reporters, though, or at least he knew of them. These would be the same kind of

people who had come to witness his parents' trial—hungry for a hint of explanation, rejoicing in whatever came their way. They looked less eager now than they had then, more worried, but they still stared at him with open curiosity. Harry nodded. It would be the spectators who came to the press conference; more ordinary citizens would be content to read what he said in the newspapers.

Aurors moved through the crowd, registering wands and glaring at anyone who got too rowdy. It took Harry a moment to realize they weren't the only Ministry officials there. Wizards in nondescript dark robes slithered through the spectators more gracefully than the Aurors, and sometimes paused as if they were only ordinary people idly jostling for a better spot.

Harry raised his eyebrows. Unspeakables. Scrimgeour is taking my security seriously, it seems.

Well, it was in public, and the last time Scrimgeour had seen him, Diggle had tried to kill him. Harry supposed he'd won the right to feel a little paranoid.

He glanced over his shoulder, to see how the others were settling. Draco had taken one of the chairs near the back of the stage and adopted a perfect pose and perfect bored face. Snape was sitting beside him, scowling as if he hated every foot separating Harry and him. Connor was talking earnestly to Scrimgeour. Harry cocked his head, then remembered Connor saying last summer that he'd written Scrimgeour several times about the trial and struck up a relationship with him. Harry supposed he was seeing the results of those letters now.

"Mr. Potter," said an unfamiliar voice.

Harry kept his head turned, as though he had no idea who that surname belonged to. A moment later, Skeeter's tone, honed to precise nastiness, said, "Really, Melinda, you might try reading the Prophet once in a while. It would enlarge your grammatical skills as well as your knowledge of current events. Harry renounced his parents' name at his parents' trial. Do try to keep up."

Melinda Honeywhistle growled under her breath and said, "Harry," in a tone that implied she hated it. She would be someone used to making formalities into a mockery, Harry thought distantly as he turned and faced her.

"Yes, ma'am?" he asked.

"Would you mind answering a few questions before the conference begins?" She beamed up at him—the expression was patently false; Skeeter was better at this, Harry thought—and tapped her quill against her notebook. "Strictly off the record, I promise."

Harry gave her an empty, polite smile. "Sorry, ma'am, I can't. I promised that I'd save all my announcements for the conference itself, and that doesn't begin until the Minister says it will." He turned back to the conversation between Scrimgeour and his brother. The Minister had bent down now, and was speaking in a low, rapid voice. Connor listened raptly, nodding now and then. Harry frowned. What in the world can he have planned?

"Oh, come, Mr. Potter—"

"Melinda, really," said Skeeter, her voice holding just the right amount of shock.

"Harry, I mean." Honeywhistle said that as if it were a talisman against her forgetting his proper name again. "Surely it won't hurt to answer just a few questions? Nothing about what brings you here today, I promise. I'm doing a human interest piece about victims of child abuse, and I'd just like to talk to both you and your brother quickly, not at all in-depth."

Harry could see Snape rising to his feet. Uh-oh. Tempting as it was to let Snape deal with Honeywhistle, Harry didn't want the press conference to start off with the kind of spell incident that would make headlines overshadowing his announcement. "I'm afraid that's impossible, ma'am," he said. "Here comes the Minister, anyway."

That was true. Scrimgeour had spun away from Connor with a nod, and Connor took his seat, looking satisfied. Scrimgeour did pause

halfway across the stage to give Snape a look. It was a very clear look. Snape sat back down.

“Back a few steps, ladies, if you please,” said Scrimgeour, his face tight and his eyes on fire. Harry wondered if he had a grudge against Honeywhistle in particular, or if he just hated people violating the proprieties at events like this. Both Honeywhistle and Skeeter stepped away from the stage, and Scrimgeour tapped his wand against his throat. “Sonus,” he said, even as he glanced at Harry.

Harry nodded, just slightly.

Scrimgeour faced the chattering reporters and crowd and coughed. The sound echoed several times around the expanse of cobblestones, warded with extensive charms to turn away Muggle notice and entrance, where the Ministry had chosen to build the platform. Most of the people who’d been talking jumped at once and turned their attention back to the Minister.

“Thank you for coming,” said Scrimgeour. Even with the charm amplifying his voice, it was just the right volume, Harry thought, grave and courteous without being overwhelming. He’d obviously learned public speaking along with every other Ministerial duty that mattered. He paused for a moment, as if measuring up the threats that the Aurors and Unspeakables might have missed, and then continued. “This is a press conference arranged through the Ministry, though with the cooperation of Harry, who until recently was Harry Potter. He has an announcement that concerns the safety of the whole of wizarding Britain. With that in mind, here he is, to make his announcement. Questions will only be permitted after he has finished speaking.” He said the last with a significant glance at Melinda Honeywhistle, and then tapped his throat to silence his own voice, nodding at Harry.

Harry was not going to trust to Sonus; he didn’t have the Minister’s experience with it. He used a charm he’d found during his research on Ariadne’s Web, instead, when he’d had the idea, born from a half-crazed lack of sleep, that he might be able to send a wind through the lightning ward around Durmstrang.

“Insusurro,” he murmured, and the air near everyone’s ears altered, vibrating in tune with his voice, carrying it to them as if he were standing next to them and speaking at normal volume. More than one person jumped when he began giving his prepared speech, but at least they wouldn’t miss anything important.

“My name is Harry, as you know,” he said, turning his head from side to side, meeting as many of their eyes as he could. His heart had begun to pound a few minutes ago, but now it retreated into a hard, steady beat. This really wasn’t much different than addressing his allies, especially since he didn’t need to raise his voice to insure he was heard. “Until recently, as the Minister says, I was Harry Potter. But one thing about me has not changed, and that is the extent of my magic and my commitment to using it to guarantee freedom for as many wizards and magical creatures as I can.”

He let a few of the restraints on his magic slip. Harry heard people gasp as they felt his power for the first time. He let it flurry above their heads, an invisible presence for the most part—unless someone else saw it visually, he supposed—but transforming the rain into soft flakes of snow.

The thunder screamed at him, the Dark magic feeling and responding to his strength. Harry let a grim smile pull at his lips as he brought down the barriers on himself again, and it promptly began raining harder than ever. He couldn’t have proved his point better if he tried.

“The wild Dark has been provoked,” he said. “This is the magic that opposes the Light, that runs in the dark spaces between the stars, that dances on Walpurgis Night.” The majority of the people in the crowd looked frightened, and Harry didn’t blame them. They were Light wizards. The wild Dark was the stuff of nightmares to them, or stories their parents had used to frighten them. “It intends to come sweeping in on Midwinter night, the solstice, when the moon will be dark. That is a time of power for it. As a prelude to that, it has hatched these storms, but all of these storms are nothing next to what it intends to bring down on Midwinter.”

He heard murmurs of rising panic, and knew he didn’t dare let them advance too far. He held up his left arm, and saw multiple eyes fix on

it, noting the missing sleeve and the missing hand. Argutus was, thankfully, keeping out of sight.

“I intend to fight it,” he said quietly. “If it were only hunting Voldemort, I would not condemn it, but it will destroy anything in its path. And I challenge power that does that.” He turned his arm over. “No matter what it costs me. No matter what kind of power it is, Dark or Light. I will protect you as best as I can. I must ask that you take precautions that night. Do not travel if at all possible on the twenty-first of December, and set up your strongest wards. Beware of Dark magical creatures; they may become bolder as the wild Dark nears. Do not go outside.”

They stared at him, their mouths slightly parted. That had happened to even Skeeter and Honeywhistle, Harry saw with a gush of amusement.

He turned and looked upwards. As they’d planned before he left Hogwarts, Fawkes chose that moment to appear, flaring into being above the platform with a ringing cry that challenged the Dark and negated it. The rain around him turned into a corona of steam as he coasted down and landed on Harry’s right arm, upraised to receive him. The phoenix tossed his head back and loosed a deep, thrilling song. Harry could see it strengthening and comforting the people who watched the platform, much as it had done for him in the Chamber of Secrets.

Fascinated, awed looks had already appeared on their faces, even before Fawkes began to sing. Harry suspected few of them would ever have been so close to a phoenix before, and they would be remembering that Fawkes was a creature of ultimate Light.

“I am going to fight this,” said Harry. “I promise you. I am not a Declared Lord, but I have the power of one. That power is now turned to protecting you, defending you, serving you—healing you if necessary when the storm has passed.” He tilted his head, aware of a quiet strength rising in him. He wasn’t sure if it’d come because he called it, or if it came from the trust growing in their faces, or if he was starting to believe his own carefully orchestrated show. “I will defeat it, with the help of the Light.”

Fawkes spread his wings and sang again. His feathers were not quite burning, but shifting from color to color, red on gold on blue. Harry had to tear his eyes away before he was mesmerized along with all the other spectators. Fawkes seemed to be taking the approach of the wild Dark quite as seriously as he was. The phoenix had grown brighter and brighter in the past few days, and he sang more often.

"I am doing this because I am vates," Harry added. He suspected that at least a few questions would concern what he had to gain from this, when he was neither a Light Lord nor a Dark one. "I still support the rights of magical creatures, and would like to see all of them free. I still support the repeal of the anti-werewolf laws, among others." He felt Scrimgeour's quick, stabbing glance, but didn't look aside from the crowd to meet it. It was remarkable, really, how he felt right now. These were his people—his to serve and defend and protect, since they couldn't do it themselves. A sweet shiver ran down his spine. If he fought the wild Dark, he would only be doing what he was supposed to be doing, what he had wanted to do ever since Narcissa had written to him in the persona of Starborn and suggested that a powerful wizard need not become a Lord. "But I count wizards and witches as among those I protect. And the wild Dark is no one's friend now that it has started hunting. I will oppose it."

He waited a moment longer, his arm uplifted beneath Fawkes's body, the rain around them hissing away before it managed to touch them.

Then he dropped his arm, and Fawkes rose above his head, hovering with wings spread like an eagle's, singing with all his might. A burst of radiance traveled from him over the heads of the crowd, and then he settled on Harry's shoulder, head bowed so that his plumes brushed Harry's neck. Harry raised his hand and scratched gently at the downy breast feathers.

"I will take questions now," he said quietly.

Skeeter tried, she really did, but Melinda Honeywhistle still managed to ask the first one. "Does this mean that you're Declaring for Light, vates?" she asked, apparently deciding that she preferred that to his first name.

Harry laughed. "Did I say I was?"

"You have a phoenix on your shoulder," said Honeywhistle, even as her Quick-Quotes Quill stabbed and rustled over the paper. "You said that you were going to use Light magic to fight the Dark. I think it's a reasonable assumption."

"Reasonable assumptions are often wrong, ma'am." Harry found that he was enjoying himself. He'd told the truth, and what dramatic elements he'd used were really part of him—no borrowed phoenixes here. "In this case, Fawkes has been bonded to me since this spring, and that was his choice. He used to belong to Albus Dumbledore, but abandoned him when he started disapproving of Dumbledore's choices." Mouths opened at that, and quills rustled faster. Fawkes crooned to confirm it. "And I said I would be using Light magic because one uses Light magic to fight the wild Dark. It would simply absorb and consume Dark Arts. That does not mean I am loyal to Light to the exclusion of all else, as a Declaration would imply."

Honeywhistle tried to ask something else, but this time, Skeeter managed to get in. "Do you intend to stand poised between Dark and Light the rest of your life, Harry?" she asked. Her eyes gleamed with interest. Harry was sure that she was dreaming of the front page of the Prophet again, though what headline she'd use, he didn't know.

"As long as I live, yes," said Harry. "A vates must, and I'll only Declare for Dark or Light if I fail as vates. I don't intend to fail."

"What advantages would you say that using both Dark and Light magic offers?" Skeeter asked.

Harry cocked his head. He could give a light, easy answer about his range of magic being greater, of course, but that wasn't what he wanted to do. He wanted to say something that would make people understand how he truly felt, and not just the practical advantages of it. Then, they might see their way clearer to following his ideals, and not just following him.

"It lets me be without fear," he said, knowing she would hear him thanks to the charm guiding the words to her ear. "Not that I'm never scared, of course, but it means that I don't have to fear Dark or Light because I don't understand them, the way that can happen when a Declared wizard becomes too invested in his own allegiance. In some ways, it's not much different from being undeclared altogether, but I understand that most undeclared wizards still don't use Dark Arts."

"Are you saying you do?" That was the wizard in the tatty robes, leaning forward intently.

Harry lifted his eyebrows. "I have, yes."

"Can you give some examples of places and times where you think Dark Arts are permissible?" That was a witch standing behind Honeywhistle, bouncing up and down on her toes to be noticed. "After all, the Ministry has banned them, and for good reasons in most cases."

"In most cases," Harry agreed. "But I have used what is classified as Dark magic to cut some of the webs on magical creatures, and in battle against Voldemort." It was rather funny to see the witch stop bouncing and shiver, as though Voldemort would appear and hex her for listening to his name. "I've also been the victim of curses like that. It helps to know what your enemy's going to use against you."

"Would you advocate the Ministry lifting the bans on Dark Arts?" the witch pressed, apparently over her fear of the Dark Lord.

"I would not advocate the Ministry doing anything in particular about them," Harry murmured, aware that Scrimgeour was watching him. "Taken together, they're too broad a category to simply ban or lift the ban on. There are some individual spells I might lobby for, yes. Certainly not the Unforgivable Curses, and not most of the spells Voldemort's Death Eaters use."

The witch tried to ask another question, but a wizard using Sonorus bested her. "Harry!" he boomed. "Is it true that you consider the rights of centaurs and werewolves more important than the rights of wizards and witches?"

Harry bowed his head. "Thank you for letting me know of a deficiency in my spell, sir. I shall correct it right away."

"What?" The booming voice was baffled now.

Harry looked up and smiled sweetly in his direction. "I cast a charm that would enable everyone to hear me during my speech," he said. "But it must have a weakness in it, because you didn't hear me say that I count wizards and witches among those I protect. I'll look into that before I cast the spell again."

Snickers interrupted the wizard's attempt to bluster through that, and someone else called out, "Do you see yourself bound to oppose Voldemort because you're the Boy-Who-Lived?"

Harry snorted. "I'm bound to oppose him because I have the power to do so, and I see that there's a problem. The person who sees the problem and can correct it has the responsibility to do so, in my view."

"But what about the prophecy that says you're supposed to defeat him?" the same reporter, probably—she was far enough back that Harry couldn't see her in the general press—persisted. "The one you spoke about in your parents' trial?"

Harry cocked his head. "That is perhaps a reason, but only a secondary one. My parents counted on that to save them and excuse their actions. I plan never to do so."

There were a few more questions, but most of them were repetitions of what had gone before, or far enough away from the topic at hand that Harry turned them aside with a light jest and refused to answer. At last, the reporters looked at each other and apparently had no more to say. Harry smiled. That was one of the advantages of being as straightforward and speaking as much truth as possible. It left few holds for anyone to grab his words and try to spin them, though he was sure some of the stories they published about this would manage to do it.

"If that is all?" Scrimgeour, who'd cast Sonorus on himself again, asked, and was answered by nodding heads. "Then Mr. Connor Potter would like to make an announcement."

Harry stepped aside, and watched curiously as his brother marched to the front of the stage. He was probably chewing his lip again, and his voice was a bit too loud when he spoke. But the content of his announcement would take attention away from the way he said it. It certainly snared Harry's.

"I'm going to Declare for Light," said Connor. "I just wanted everyone to know that. That doesn't mean my brother is," he added. Harry wondered, through his daze, if it was instinct that led him to think the reporters would try to link their announcements, or if he just wanted to make absolutely clear that his actions didn't control Harry's. "But I am."

The reporters threw questions at him, of course. Connor rode most of them out admirably, though once or twice he stammered. Harry watched his back thoughtfully, but managed a smile when Connor turned to him.

Of course he has the right to make whatever Declaration he likes. And I can't say it's a surprise, really. Connor's always been more Light-minded. If he's spoken with Scrimgeour and Remus and others who are loyal to the Light over these past few months, it's not surprising they've convinced him.

I just hope this doesn't put a rift between us.

Connor finally stepped back from the edge of the platform with a defiant little toss of his head that Harry recognized; it meant that he was going to go ride his broom, and nothing Lily or James said would stop him. But that was all right. It was probably the attitude he would need to weather the storm his announcement would cause.

He caught Harry's eye, and smiled uncertainly. "We're all right?" he whispered, then winced as he realized he hadn't taken Sonorus off. He quickly removed it.

Harry nodded to him. "Of course."

Connor smiled in relief.

Harry glanced around one more time, but the crowd was already dispersing—the wizards and witches who had come in search of entertainment to look for something more entertaining, the reporters racing to write their stories first and launch them on the wizarding world. Harry relaxed and glanced up at Scrimgeour, who had come to a stop next to him, frowning.

"You meant what you said about Dark Arts and anti-werewolf laws, didn't you." Scrimgeour's voice was more resigned than anything else.

Harry arched his eyebrows. "You know I did."

Scrimgeour nodded. "I have a few pieces of information for you," he said. "The first is that one of our Muggleborn Aurors located the place you were looking for. The graveyard where Tom Riddle is buried is in a town called Little Hangleton." He handed Harry a sheaf of parchment. "Here's the map and the information on how to get there. It turns out there are Apparition points not too far from it. The Ministry actually handled a murder case there about fifty years ago. Strange case," he added, with a shake of his head. "A wizard named Morfin Gaunt confessed to the murder of the Riddles."

Harry swallowed, his hand closing convulsively on the parchment. "I don't think it was him."

"Probably not," said Scrimgeour dryly. "The second piece of information is that I questioned Diggle, and he confessed to letting a woman named Hestia Jones in to see Dumbledore."

"He did?" Harry blinked. From what he had seen of Diggle, he hadn't thought a wild elephant could drag a confession out of the man.

"Yes. Strangest thing, really. He was willing to talk after he had a bit of pumpkin juice with breakfast."

Harry narrowed his eyes. Scrimgeour looked a bit too innocent. Before he could say anything, though, the Minister went on. "We've confirmed that Hestia Jones has connections with Order of the Phoenix members. We'll be bringing her in for questioning today." He looked straight at Harry. "She was the only one who helped Dumbledore cast the compulsion spell, from what Diggle said, but she can lead us to others. We'll have the rest of them yet."

Harry nodded slowly. "Thank you."

"Diggle shouldn't have done what he did," said Scrimgeour, narrowing his eyes in turn. "I dislike attempted murder, Harry, and just because it's attempted murder on you doesn't make it any less serious. Rather the opposite, in fact."

"What."

It wasn't a question. Harry froze, then turned his head slowly, inch by inch, to meet Snape's eyes. He hadn't heard his guardian come up behind him.

"I had heard nothing of this," Snape said. Draco stood next to him, looking equally furious.

Harry looked around for help, but Scrimgeour had discreetly stepped away, and Connor just happened to be facing the other direction. Fawkes cocked his head and crooned as if to say that Harry really should have known better, then took off in a flap of wings. Argus was silent.

"You will be explaining on the way back to Hogwarts why you failed to inform us of this," said Snape, even as their escort of Aurors came forward again.

Woefully, Harry bowed his head and followed.

Intermission: That Which Burns Shall Rise Again

There were Aurors at her door.

Hestia Jones knew that, but it didn't stop her from penning the last line in the letter she was sending, the code that would tell the Order of the Phoenix member that she could be trusted, and that this was a true message that had the approval of Dumbledore, not a prank or a matter of minor importance. She tied the letter to the leg of the waiting owl, a small one which would attract barely any attention, especially now that dusk was falling and non-magical owls as well as magical ones were in motion.

"Go, now," she whispered to the owl, pausing to scratch its head. "You know who you have to find."

The owl hooted enthusiastically and took wing through the back window of her flat, the only one that was open. Hestia smiled. That window looked out over an alley of wizarding London, one too small for a human to get through on foot. No one would be watching there.

So. It was done, now. Her last message was gone, and she had done her part to make sure that the influence of the Light would not die, even though they had caught Kingsley Shacklebolt and Homer Digne.

"Hestia Jones!" The Auror at the door was using an impressive-sounding growl, as though he imagined that would make her surrender faster. "Undo your locking charms and surrender your wand."

Hestia, whose wand was on a table across the room, sniffed, but made no attempt to move. Her eyes were on the vanishing owl. They remained that way even when the Aurors at last blasted aside her door and stamped into the room, pulling her arms roughly behind her back as they arrested her.

None of them understood. She had known that, of course, but she confirmed their lack of comprehension when she looked into their eyes. Hestia glanced down at the floor to hide her smile.

The Order of the Phoenix was not some spreading vine they could cut down and stamp on and burn and be done with. It was a group of people with the same beliefs, people whose minds were touched with Light, who knew that no matter the unfortunate pressure of some accusations and some Dark wizards who pretended to be Light in power, the group's mission—fighting against Dark Lords—must continue. They would be the ones who weren't fooled, the ones who saw with the clear eyes of their namesake. When Harry Potter revealed himself to be the Dark Lord that Hestia knew he was, they would be ready, even if some of their members were in prison.

And she knew there was another person, his existence hinted at in whispers, who could make use of them, even if Lord Dumbledore was tried and condemned and stripped of his magic. He could have been a Light Lord, but he had preferred to let his protégé, Albus, claim the title. Now that he knew he was needed, he would come out of seclusion, and he would find the Order of the Phoenix ready and waiting to assist him.

After all, Hestia thought, as the Aurors searched her for knives or magical artifacts or extra wands, when a phoenix burns, it rises again. They really ought to have known that about us.

The serene smile remained on her face even as the Aurors shoved her out the door and Apparated with her to Tullianum. Snape sat on one side of his private rooms and stared at Harry. The boy stared back, arms crossed over his chest as if he were cold. Draco stood beside him, his hand twitching as if he wanted to clutch Harry's shoulder in reassurance. He always drew his hand back, though, when he met Snape's eyes. Both of them knew how serious this was.

Harry had nearly died, again, the day he went to the Ministry to speak with Scrimgeour about Shackbolt, Mallory, and Diggle. And he had not told them.

Snape would have tried yelling, but he didn't think any of them could bear it. Besides, it hadn't made an impact on Harry before. Nor had scolding, or the urgent pleas to tell them when his life was in danger.

Snape wasn't even entirely sure what had prompted Harry to keep silent this time. It was not as though he would want to protect Diggle, since the Ministry was charging him with attempted murder anyway. That much he had confirmed before he shut down and stared at Snape and Draco both with blank green eyes.

So Snape decided to speak of the emotion that most drove him at the moment, and, judging from the expression on Draco's face when he thought no one was looking, drove him, too.

"I am sorry that you do not trust us yet, Harry," he said quietly.

Harry blinked and jerked his head up. "What are you talking about?" he asked. "I trust you. Of course I trust you." He glanced up at Draco and tried to smile. The smile withered when Draco just stared back at him.

"Then why keep silent?" Snape asked.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know if I can explain it," he said. "But—well, the Aurors were most concerned about the fact that Diggle had a knife at all, not about his almost killing me. It was a pathetic attempt. I took care of it as soon as it happened. Scrimgeour is worried, of course, but he worries all the time anyway." He tried another smile, this time with slightly more success. "Why should I worry you with telling you about it?"

Snape sighed. Even to his ears, it had a weary sound. "Because I want to know, Harry," he said. "And when you do not tell me of these attempts, something so vital and important as your nearly dying, it does make me feel as though you don't trust me."

"Me, too," said Draco, crouching down beside Harry's seat so that Harry couldn't help but see him. "I'm not sure whether I think that you don't trust us not to get angry at you or don't trust us not to rush out and eviscerate the bastard responsible, but either way, I'd rather that you told us."

Harry shrank into a corner of the couch. "But I nearly die all the time," he said. "You've even seen most of those happen. Why should one more time matter?"

Draco glanced back at Snape. Snape drew in a deep breath and controlled his immediate response. That Harry could even ask such a question showed how differently he thought about this kind of thing from most people. Snape couldn't snap out that Harry's life was of course important, because he wouldn't understand.

"Because your life is important to me, Harry," he said. "To us," he amended, when Draco opened his mouth. "You cannot imagine how important."

"But I know that," said Harry. "That's the reason I don't tell you about all of the murder attempts. I don't want you to spend your lives in a constant state of fear."

"I would rather do that than have a false happiness," said Snape, arriving at the crux of the matter at last. "I would rather know that you are in danger and be ready to protect you than fondly imagine nothing is wrong and have an unexpected threat come at you from behind."

"You could also, you know, always hold back from going into danger," said Draco, with the Malfoy trick of putting the force of a yell into a whisper, which Snape had heard only Lucius master before.

Harry sighed. "That's not going to happen, Draco, not with as many times as I don't even realize that my life might hang in the balance, or with as many times as I need to experience danger to make a new ally trust me."

"You still let people have too much of you," said Draco, resting his hand on Harry's shoulder as though he thought that would make him more likely to listen. "You don't need to experience danger to make them trust you. It's just the most expedient way for that other person. But not for us, Harry. We would rather that you stayed safe."

Harry looked away, biting at his lip. Snape nodded slowly. Draco had hit on the one argument that might actually convince Harry to think

before he plunged into danger. It was not as good as making him value his own life for its own sake, but it was a start.

“And you would rather have the worry, too?” Harry whispered. “I don’t need to protect you from knowing?”

“No,” said Snape forcefully, not intending to let this sign of sense get away. Harry’s eyes returned to his face. “At the moment, all you spare us from feeling is a few days of worry. We find out in the end, and feel the worry delayed, and anger, and the helplessness that I, at least, experience, when I know that your own distrust of me prevents me from helping you.”

“That’s not it at all!” Harry said, squirming upright on the couch. “I don’t distrust you. I just want to defend you from the helplessness you seem to experience at finding that I’ve nearly died again.”

“Truly?” Snape considered Harry’s fervent nod, and prevented himself from reacting to the statement that Harry trusted him with anything other than a sharply indrawn breath. “Well, it feels like the other.”

“With me, too,” said Draco, with perhaps a bit too much sadness in his voice, his eyes cast down on the floor. But if Harry thought the pouting was false, he obviously chose not to take it that way, reaching out and resting his hand and his wrist on Draco’s shoulders.

“I didn’t know,” Harry whispered. “I did think I was defending you from knowing. And the Ministry was handling Diggle, and, well, it happened so suddenly, and I didn’t even get a scratch—” He cut himself off abruptly. “But that doesn’t matter, I suppose,” he said. “You still want to know.”

“Yes, Harry,” said Snape.

Draco’s answer was wordless, an intense stare, but it still made Harry bow his head and nod.

The boys left for the Slytherin common room then, and left Snape to summon a house elf, request a glass of wine, and stare into the fire.

It is growing, that trust between us. Slowly, it's coming back, like a phoenix burned in its own fire.

Snape had not permitted himself to react the way he most wanted to to Harry's declaration just now, the way he had held himself back from doing anything last month when Harry spoke of admiring him. With some children, he knew, it would have been the right course, to show how much he valued those seemingly casual words, the evidence that their love for him was not totally destroyed.

But Harry had heard Snape say that it was love for him that had made Snape accuse his parents and Dumbledore. He knew how Snape felt. It was the consequences of his actions that he had become angry at and hated.

Snape would need to let Harry find his way back to him on his own, burn away his hatred like a coating of ash and burst into new flames, a rising of love and hope and trust that would renew their bond as no forced words—which Harry would probably think of as manipulation anyway—could.

That Harry had not been chased away utterly by Snape's actions on his behalf, that he did not hate him forever, was good fortune such as he had not conceived of when he sent the owl to the Ministry bearing the Pensieve Potion and the written records of Dumbledore's memories. He did have a future, a chance, with his ward. And he would not ruin it by moving too quickly.

That which burns shall rise again, he thought. It had been one of Albus's favorite sayings, but it was older than he was, and therefore no one could prevent Snape from valuing it.

We shall rise again.

He shuddered then, and stood to do some experimental brewing. His own mind was taking a far too soppy turn for his taste.

Interlude: The Serpent Coils

December 12th, 1995

Dear Lord Voldemort:

I hope you will forgive the familiarity, but as my last letter to you began the same way, I thought I should stay consistent. I write now with confidence in your ability to decipher the charm I have used to disguise my handwriting, and your ability to understand what you will find when you do. No one has ever said that Lord Voldemort is an ignoramus.

I bring information that you may know already, along with the evidence of my own eyes. I was in the crowd at Harry Potter's press conference yesterday, and he never noticed me. Of course, he has the habit of overlooking me. Even if he had noticed I was there, it is likely he would not have paid the slightest bit of attention.

Potter, as you may know, declared that he would be fighting the wild Dark and the storm it will bring down on Midwinter night. I am well-aware that Lord Voldemort, of course, will know the motives of the wild Dark magic and how best to harness that power. Potter, however, was supremely confident. The tone of his voice, the shine in his eyes, the movement of his arms, and the phoenix that landed on his shoulder, all proclaimed that he knew how to handle this. I suspect that part of this was showmanship for the crowd, but not all of it can have been; Potter is not that good a liar. Thus comes my warning. Potter has reason to be confident.

I have, unfortunately, not been able to learn the details of his plan. He has told his Dark allies that his Light ones are handling it. So he will use Light magic—but that covers large areas of spells. I am sorry not to be able to offer you more information.

One interesting tidbit that your own spies might or might not have seen: Scrimgeour spoke with Potter after the press conference was done, and gave him a large packet of papers. I was not very near the stage, but I know some spells that ride the wind and turn it inside out,

and I did overhear the names “Little Hangleton,” “Tom Riddle,” and “Morfing Gaunt.” I hope that these will mean something to my Lord.

Please let me know, my lord, if I can be of more use to you, or if you have instructions for me. I understand I am not initiated, and that what you will find when the charm to disguise my handwriting dissipates may lessen your trust in me. But, I assure you, I am ready and willing to serve you. Potter will never give me what I want. You can, and if it suits your Lordship’s pleasure, you will.

I wish you luck on Midwinter night, my lord.

The Serpent.

Chapter Fifty-Three: Tonight There Shall Be No Moon

The night before Midwinter, Pansy climbed the North Tower to its highest point and stood there watching the storm.

It barely rained now. It had become a thing of fire and air, lighting and wind flickering and dancing as if in answer to a question the giants had asked. One flash spoke from a corner of the sky, and was answered by a gust that tore Pansy's hood off and sent her hair streaming behind her. Then the wind coiled around her legs, with a howl like a burning cat, and the lighting answered, arcing from the north to the west.

Pansy wondered who else was watching the storm, if they saw the same things and what they thought if they did. She wondered how Muggles were explaining all this strange weather. Of course, even if one of them thought of the provoked Dark magic as an explanation, they wouldn't be able to feel it.

Lightning and wind talked to each other for hours, until midnight came. Pansy then felt the deep silence of the dead all around her. She had already learned to read those silences, though as yet she heard their voices in little more than whispers. They were in dread of something.

Pansy lifted her head. She could see no light. The moon had gone, of course, and the clouds covered the stars.

From one horizon to the next, from life towards death, from darkness unto darkness, the voice of the thunder spoke, menacing and all-encompassing. Pansy gripped the sides of the North Tower as it shook, the boom resounding in its bones. Somewhere to the left of her, the wind seized a bit of stone from Hogwarts's walls and sent it whirling furiously to the west. Pansy suspected it would hit a wizard or witch in the head and cause him or her to die before the night was out.

In the wake of that thunder, the night went suddenly and ominously still. Pansy could hear the silence of the dead returning to the cool, dry thing it usually was, the empty, expectant quietude of the grave. She looked up, and saw the clouds parting like water troubled by the fall of a stone, slipping down the sides of the sky. The stars shone out

overhead again. Pansy wished they hadn't. They were weak, pale things, making the darkness seem all the stronger and the smuggier for it.

She closed her eyes, and leaned her head on her clasped hands. She knew the Dark hadn't gone. It was withdrawing its strength, melting to the south and the north, gathering and then whirling around above the sea. It would come back and strike at its chosen location with all the more speed and power for not storming for a day. Pansy suspected it would arrive at midnight tomorrow, or perhaps sunset, the moment when the light yielded the sky.

She shuddered. She was glad that she wasn't going with Harry tomorrow to face the wrath of the wild Dark. She could not imagine how he would counter it.

No, you just have a full day of classes and trying to get used to seeing death, Pansy, she thought, straightening and shaking her hair back. Time to go to bed.

It should be safe to enter the common room now, she thought. The sight that had driven her forth from it, the death she could not bear to see written on the air in letters of fire, should have faded. Its bearer would also have gone to bed.

Harry had a hard time keeping himself from going mad in his classes that day.

He could feel the wild Dark now, waiting. It had been growing clearer and clearer with every day since the first attack by the storm, and now that it was the twenty-first, the first day of winter, the day of longest darkness, he felt it everywhere. When he turned his eyes on the walls of the Slytherin common room, he could see shadows whipping just out of sight, like the trailing edge of a robe. When he briefly stepped outside to see if what the Gryffindor Quidditch team was saying was true and the storms had stopped, he felt it smiling down at him from beyond the steel-clear sky. When he tried to pay attention in Defense Against the Dark Arts, he felt it weighting Acies's words, distorting them and twisting them out of true, every now and

then showing him a vision of a blackness as complete as a cave underground.

The wild Dark had come, and Harry did not know if he was ready.

Fawkes, who rode on his shoulder to every class that day, and regularly shifted between scarlet and gold and blue in his feathers, crooned when he thought that. A clear vision formed in Harry's mind, of the sun rising after a long night that no one thought would ever end. Harry managed a smile as he stroked the phoenix's neck.

He would have to be ready. He had made what preparations he could. He would be going to the graveyard when sunset came, with Snape, Draco, and those of his allies who could not fight tonight but still wanted to protect him as advance guards. Augustus, who was serving as focal point for the Light wizard ritual, would follow him in some time later, when preparations for the ritual were complete.

Harry wanted to be there at sunset just in case the Dark chose the yielding of the light for its strike, but he didn't think it would. As the day wore on and the light declined, he sensed it retreating still. To get to Little Hangleton at sunset, it would have had to gallop and tear cross-country, summoning its power from every corner of the sky, and Harry knew that wouldn't happen. The Dark would favor a slow, dramatic, majestic approach.

Still, it made the sky shake with the tread of its strength, and he knew the melodrama it favored wasn't humorous, as it would have been with an opponent of lesser power, as it was occasionally even with Voldemort. This was the Dark's cruel way of drawing out the anticipation, taunting him without words that he could not stop it, that no one could. A storm that could lay waste to the British Isles was coming. What effort of a mortal wizard could stop that?

The efforts of many mortal wizards, Harry thought, as he stroked Fawkes's feathers. That's the answer. It has to be.

And perhaps more than just mortal wizards, given that Acies came to find him after lunch. "Harry," she said, her head bowed so that her hood shaded her eyes, her voice low. "I may be able to bring one of

the Singers to your defense. I promise nothing, because they are free and it is not my place to constrain them into an answer. I dare not even persuade. I can only mention the idea, and hope that one of them approves.”

“A dragon might come to the graveyard?” Harry breathed.

“Perhaps,” Acies said, stressing the word. “And I do not know what kind of Singer it would be, and if she would even arrive in time. I mention the possibility only so that you will not be surprised if it does happen, rather than as something to depend on.” She bobbed her head and then stepped back; Harry could sense the curious gazes of those students who wanted to know what Professor Merryweather was talking so intensely to him about. “Tell your allies not to harm her if she does come.”

“I promise,” said Harry, feeling a bit breathless as Acies strode away. He wondered for a moment why she’d seemed so certain that it would be a female dragon who came, and then remembered that female dragons were usually larger, stronger, and fiercer than the males. She’d probably spread the idea before those Singers she thought would do the most good in battle.

If even a dragon can help in the battle against the wild Dark.

But, Harry could not deny, he felt a bit more cheerful after that.

“Ready?”

Harry, his breath pluming before his face, nodded, and then cast a warming charm on himself. He, Snape, and Draco had waited on the Hogsmeade road for the Dark allies who could accompany them—which meant most of them save Charles and Thomas—to arrive. Now Belville, grumbling about the cold and the damage that warming charms did to his fine cloak, had finally joined them. It was Lucius who asked the question, his eyes slit and his face as proud and cruel as a hawk’s.

“I am,” Harry said, just to reassure those of his allies who hadn’t seen him nod, and then looked quickly around at them. “You all have a

clear picture of the Apparition point in your heads?" He'd discussed it with them by the means of Charles's communication spell, as well as owed them copies of the maps that Scrimgeour had procured for him, and Henrietta and Hawthorn, among others, had Apparated there already. But the last thing Harry wanted was any of them getting splinched, so he thought it best to ask.

Nods and murmurs answered. Honoria actually laughed at him. "Honestly, Harry, we know how much this matters," she said, though she didn't look as though she knew how much it mattered at all. Letters of red and gold marched on her cloak, flashing insults to the wild Dark back at the dying sun. "We deserve to die by now if we don't."

Harry ignored her as much as possible—he was still irritated that she hadn't taken the payment of the life debt seriously—and then moved the extra step beyond Hogwarts's wards. The picture of the Apparition point was clear in his mind. He could feel the reassuring presence of Regulus and Peter at his back, Snape and Draco at his sides. Fawkes crooned above his head, and then all of that vanished into the blackness of Apparition.

They reappeared on a hillside, the Apparition point concealed in a thick grove of trees that almost blazed to Harry's sight with Muggle-repelling charms. He stepped hastily out of the way as the others Apparated in, and glanced around a few times.

The countryside seemed utterly unspectacular. Long shadows stretched from the grove across the steep ground, which canted more sharply below them than it did above. The grass here was matted and half-frozen with the frost they'd received this morning, the first proper one of the season, and too long to indicate that Muggles cared for it. Harry made out a path winding lazily past the grove. It didn't look well-used, either, since spreading ground plants obscured half of it.

"How far is the graveyard from here?" Burke grumbled.

"Less than a quarter mile, according to the Ministry maps," Harry said, and lifted his head to check the time. The sun was still safely above the horizon. "This way," he added, and led them down the hill.

They walked in silence, for the most part, except for Honoria apparently attempting to tell a joke to a distinctly unamused Ignifer. Harry shaded his eyes as he stared ahead. The village of Little Hangleton started towards the bottom of the hill, Scrimgeour's information said, though so far Harry didn't see a sign of it. Well, it was supposed to be a small village, as Muggle places went.

He actually almost stumbled into the shack before he saw it. His hand touched the weathered boards, and he started back in surprise. Snape caught him, and murmured in his ear, "Harry, what is it?"

"That's not a woodpile," Harry breathed, staring at the tumble of wood he had assumed some Muggle must have cut and then dumped here carelessly.

Looking at it closely now, he could see that it was a house, if one stretched the definition of "house" until it snapped. The door had fallen off the hinges and listed badly to one side, propped up by a broken piece of wood extending from the shack's right side. A tiny gap indicated the grave of a window. Harry could see raw-toothed holes in the shack's roof, and twigs that were probably the remnants of a bird's nest.

None of that would have attracted much of his attention, though, if not for the aura of powerful magic that stormed from the place. Harry could feel it like a spreading maelstrom under the much greater influence of the Dark storm. It eddied, a sullen black whirlpool. Harry imagined what might happen to a Muggle who tried to step into the old house, and shuddered.

"I feel it, too." Snape's voice was low and hard. "What is it?"

Harry took a deep breath, and then coughed. A stench that wasn't physical choked him when he tried to inhale it. This wasn't just Dark magic, he thought. He knew the feel of that, and it was very far from being the pure evil that Light wizards thought it was, even in its wild form. This was magic worked with deliberately malevolent intent, and he didn't recognize it. He knew that he would be cursed if he tried to get into the shack, but not what form the curse would take.

"I don't know," Harry said.

Snape's hand tightened, drawing him away from the pile of wood. "Then don't fool around with it," he ordered. "When and if we have time after our business is done at the graveyard, then we'll come back."

Harry wondered for a moment what kind of wizard would have left this here without any Muggle repelling charms around it, like an open pit trap, and then snorted. Tom Riddle, of course. Voldemort. The bastard.

"Can we get a move on?" Belville's voice was arrogant, but that didn't hide the rushing undercurrent of fear. "I thought we had to be at the graveyard at sunset, in case the storm struck there."

Harry shook himself free of his fascination with the shack. Like Snape said, it was a minor mystery in the face of attack from the wild Dark, and they would investigate it only if and when they had time. Untying curses that Voldemort had set himself was no easy task, and perhaps there would turn out to be nothing worth the effort behind them. It didn't look like the kind of place that Voldemort would hide anything valuable. "I don't think it will fall there now," he said absently, and turned his face up to the winter sunlight. "It's probably coming at midnight."

Belville said something uncomplimentary to that, regarding the hurry they'd taken to get here, but Harry ignored it. He could see the houses of Little Hangleton once they got beyond the shack, as if it were the gateway to the village, and so he concentrated on casting charms that would cause any Muggles abroad to forget to see them. They saw no one as they worked their way north and west around the houses, though. Muggles couldn't feel the wild Dark, Harry thought, but they could sense enough unnaturalness in the weather to be uneasy about it. They'd stay indoors.

At least, so Harry hoped. The storm would hit Little Hangleton first if he couldn't stop it. He shuddered to think of how the wild Dark would

play with helpless Muggles, unable even to comprehend the force that faced them, much less to withstand it.

I'm doing this for them, too, then. I have to think of defending everyone, not just myself.

The weight of extra lives steadied him, rather than crushing him. It had always been that way, for Harry. If the wild Dark had just wanted him and Voldemort, he would have fought with less strength than he would now that he knew it would kill anyone who got in its way.

Kill, or torture, or play with...

He saw the stone wall of the graveyard when they left the last house behind. It sat below a much larger building that Harry suspected, from the information Scrimgeour had passed to him, was the Riddle house. The Riddles, mother and father and son, had been found dead there in the 1940's, their bodies unmarked, looks of terror on their faces. They had obviously died from the Killing Curse, and Morfin Gaunt had confessed to the murders.

Harry shook his head. I'd wager my right hand that it was Voldemort who killed them. Merlin knows how many victims have taken the blame for his crimes.

The thought ran away from his head like water through a hole in the bottom of a basin, and Harry realized he was panting. Draco noticed. He paused, then slung an arm around Harry's shoulders and squeezed firmly. They had to keep walking, or one of Harry's other allies would notice his growing discomfort, and that could be disastrous. Harry had not forgotten that a traitor was somewhere among them.

Harry leaned towards Draco, and fought to still memories of the last time he had come to this graveyard at sunset, exactly six months ago now, on the first day of summer. His left hand throbbed. He shuddered as he reimagined bonds gripping his wrists and ankles, and a flare of pain from his chest reminded him of the bite Voldemort had taken out of him when he still looked like a deformed child.

"It will be all right," Draco whispered in his ear. "Things will be different this time. You'll see."

Harry nodded into his shoulder, and kept walking. The stone wall around the graveyard drew nearer and nearer. Harry could see the headstones and angels he remembered looming above the half-tumbled rocks. He could see no sign of movement, though. He supposed that wasn't unusual. It was Thursday, not Sunday, and unless there was a funeral in the graveyard, there might be one or two Muggles visiting, no more.

Closer and closer they came, and the graveyard lay there. Harry could glimpse the grass inside it now, smooth and flat. It looked well-cared for, he thought. It had probably been the same when he was there at midsummer, but then he'd been too—busy—to notice such things.

He paused when they neared the gates. For a long moment, he couldn't force his legs to move. His heartbeat thundered in his ears, so loud that the murmurs of his allies faded behind it. He watched the sun linger in the western corner of the graveyard, and saw lights glimmering up from Little Hangleton below, and he shuddered.

"It's all right, Harry," Draco whispered. "It will be. I promise." He squeezed Harry's shoulder again. "But this time, you've got to lead."

Harry gave him a smile he hoped didn't look as pallid as it felt. Then he stepped forward and gently shifted the gates aside.

He stepped in, and then the world snapped.

Glamours fell like rags. Harry could feel the magic surrounding the graveyard now: thick charms to repel Muggles, wards to alert someone when a stranger entered, and curses running over the ground like a mat, all of it sheltering under a thick outer shell that had kept him from noticing any spells when he was outside the gates. He could see something dark writhing over the graves, and he spun back around, thinking Voldemort might have Apparated in behind him.

He hadn't, but wards had sifted down behind Harry, piling up like snow. He could barely see Draco, Snape, and the rest of his allies through the thick white lines. They were casting spells at the barrier, their lips moving in incantations that he couldn't hear. Harry swore, and swore again, and felt sweat build up beneath his cloak like a second skin.

"Potter."

Harry turned sharply. The dark thing writhing over the graves had form and definition in his eyes now, the way it hadn't when he'd been more concerned in identifying what kind of trap he'd sprung. But now...

Now...

His mind stuttered and stopped for a moment, then gagged.

The dark thing was a thicket of thorns, a mass of black branches, wide as pillars, all of them plunging into the center of the thicket, towards a root he couldn't see. The thorns themselves wound around the graves, and projected into wicked-looking tips that Harry could swear were barbed.

Impaled on three of them was a figure Harry recognized as Evan Rosier. Vines wreathed his feet and crowned his head and hair and pinned his arms to the sides, outspread. Harry could see thorns piercing the flesh of his limbs, stained red with the blood they drew. The thorns that corkscrewed into his back appeared to become one with his flesh, and Harry could see shadows running just under Rosier's ribs that were probably their ends. Rosier was crucified there, alive, and his face was twisted with a pain so profound that Harry held his breath for a long moment.

When he started breathing again with a whoosh, Rosier smiled at him. It looked as if he could barely manage the expression; it pulled on the barbs buried along his hairline, the briars that halted an inch from his eyes.

“Do you...like them?” Rosier whispered, wheezing in between each few words. Harry wondered for a moment how he could hear them, then realized he’d drawn nearer, staring up in shock and horror and an odd, dream-like fascination. “They’re...eating me alive. Drawing the...flesh out of me...through my back. They’ll...liquefy my heart in the...end. So she...told me.”

“Who?” Harry whispered. He could think of no other question, and certainly not an answer, in the face of such suffering.

Rosier blinked, and the edges embedded in his face bobbed near to him with the movement and kissed his eyelids. “The...Thorn Bitch, of course,” the Death Eater said. “Indigena...Yaxley. I thought you had...heard of her.”

“Heard of her,” said Harry, and licked his lips. Think of the storm. Voldemort’s tricks and traps are nothing next to that. But he could not look away from Rosier, could not comprehend leaving even an enemy to hurt like this. “I didn’t know she could do things like this.”

“You are...about to learn, I think,” Rosier said.

Harry opened his mouth to ask what that meant, and the grass beneath his feet whipped into motion, twining up his legs. Before Harry could think to fight, it had locked his body into place, and grown into the pocket of his robes, where it found and made off with his wand. Harry snarled, and prepared to draw his wandless magic in and wither the grass. He had no compunctions about killing other living things when they were doing the bidding of someone who could enact that sort of punishment on Rosier.

Vines lifted from the grass with a hissing sound and lashed around his arms, drawing them wide.

And Harry’s wandless magic hit the barrier of them and fell back into his body, just as it had on midsummer when opposing the wall of Voldemort’s will.

Harry screamed. He could not help it. The memories had overtaken him too suddenly and too completely. He lay on that stone again, the

one where he'd been tied and had to struggle helplessly while Cynthia Whitecheek and Fenrir Greyback killed a little boy in front of him, the one where he'd watched Voldemort come back to life, the one where Bellatrix had taken his hand.

He screamed again when he saw a figure walking towards him, obviously a witch, in the same long dark robes that Bellatrix had worn. But Rosier's voice, shouting for him to stop screaming, and the sight of two arms, whole and undamaged, projecting from the witch's robes, shoved him back into his right mind. Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath, feeling it rasp through his lungs. His throat already hurt. His right hand danced on the end of his arm, as though it wanted to detach itself from his body rather than chance being cut off.

The witch halted beneath him and looked up. Only then did Harry realize that the grass and the vines had both risen on long runners, elevating him a good ten feet above the ground. He felt his feet swaying helplessly in midair, and his wrists began to ache.

The witch studied him. Harry stared back at her. He had no doubt that this was Indigena Yaxley.

She looked ordinary enough, really, her brown hair touched with blonde and her eyes dark. What made her unusual were the shadows beneath her skin, which came into clearer view as she rotated one hand and the vines circled, moving Harry into a different position over her head. He could see leaves under her cheeks, petals cradling her eyes, the edges of vines curling around her ears and then dropping towards the collar of her robes. Harry tried to imagine the magic, along with the genius at Herbology, that it would take to put plants in that position and survive. He could not.

"There, that's better," said the witch, in a clear, crisp voice. "I prefer my guests when they aren't screaming. Dear Evan has obliged me in that, most of the time, although sometimes the pain grows too great even for him. And I haven't hurt you very much, Harry, really. Do you like them?" She nodded to the vines that gripped his arms. "My Lord has been having me experiment. These vines bind wandless magic as long as they are touching the victim's body. I went to some trouble to breed them. They won't hurt you, but they will hold you."

Speechless with hatred, Harry could only stare back at her. He had thought for a moment that this woman must be as mad as Bellatrix or Rosier, with the way she was talking, but her eyes were clear, and her smile faded as she waited and he said nothing in praise of her vines.

“It would be hard for you to appreciate them when they’re making you prisoner, I suppose,” said the woman, regret in her voice. “Pity.” Abruptly, she turned towards the house above the graveyard, head cocked as if she’d heard a summons.

Voldemort Apparated in.

Harry felt his coming as a darkening of the faint sunlight that still remained. His magic roared around him, fully recovered—and augmented, it seemed, by whatever power he’d managed to drain in the months since Harry saw him last. He walked forward with a long, sinuous dark shape gliding at his side. A newly-bred basilisk, Harry saw, without plumes—a female.

Voldemort halted beneath the vines and looked up at him. Harry’s scar split his head open like the lightning had split the sky while the storms still raged. Through the haze of pain, he saw Voldemort’s lipless mouth part in a smile.

“Bring him down, Indigena,” the Dark Lord said, somewhere far away.

The vines retracted smoothly into the earth, bearing Harry closer and closer to his enemy. The agony increased as he neared, and by the time his back touched the grass—more smoothly than he would have thought possible for a Death Eater—he was writhing in agony, though he refused to scream as yet. Yes, screaming would relieve his feelings and perhaps keep him from going mad, but he refused to let Voldemort think he had won.

Voldemort leaned towards him. When his pale face was an inch above his, the pain turned Harry’s vision white.

He still didn't think he'd screamed, but then Voldemort was drawing back and Harry heard his own breaths ripping through his nostrils and throat, hoarse, pleading sounds like the gasps of a wounded animal. "Your vines work wonderfully well, Indigena," Voldemort was saying, with laughter in his voice. "Hold him still while I summon my own pet."

"Yes, my lord," said Indigena promptly. She sounded a bit resigned, as though this wasn't her idea of fun, but Harry had no doubt she would obey. The vines holding his arms pressed a bit closer, as if to reassure him of that.

Voldemort turned away from Indigena, easing the pain in Harry's head a bit more, and hissed. Harry forced himself to listen. Voldemort was speaking Parseltongue, there was no doubt of that, but it sounded like he was doing so through a mouth full of dirt. "Come, White One, Child of the Darkest Night, Digger of Tunnels, arise!"

The grass beneath Harry churned and mounded, bearing him briefly upwards. The vines didn't loosen their hold, though, and he fell back into their cradle as the ripple of movement traveled under him and then curled around Voldemort. The Dark Lord didn't seem concerned that he was within a rapidly rising circle of earth. He simply stretched his hands out and repeated his summons. Harry realized abruptly that he was surrounded by a pale green glow, like a sickly Lumos, that stood out starkly against the night. The sun had set.

The earth erupted. Harry saw a long white coil, as sickly a color as the light surrounding Voldemort in its own way. Voldemort shifted his position easily, and then he was standing on that coil, borne aloft on it, laughing and repeating the invocation one more time.

Other white coils shifted, long mounds of rubbery flesh stretching upwards towards the hidden stars, the rushing clouds. Harry shuddered in revulsion when one brushed past him, and he smelled the scent of decay, rotting flesh, a humid smell that he would never have associated with a snake.

The basilisk swayed and hissed, and Harry turned to see her confronting a blunt head risen out of the earth, opening a maw fringed

with fangs like long strings of saliva. If the head had eyes, Harry couldn't see it.

He understood the smell, then, and the odd Parseltongue Voldemort spoke. He had summoned not a snake, but an enormous worm.

The great creature carried on rising, bursting out of corner after corner of the graveyard, until the only earth untouched was that supporting Indigena, the thorn patch embracing Rosier, and the vines that held Harry up. The witch never moved, except when she craned her neck to check on the vines. Harry saw a tender smile cross her face when she did that, as if she admired children or favored pets.

Harry managed to painfully turn his head a time or two, and made out the thick white glow of the wards at the gates. None of his allies could get through them, he knew, or they would have been here already, fighting furiously to free him from the vines.

That meant he was on his own.

Think, he ordered himself, and closed his eyes.

Voldemort spoke before he could delve into thought, though, his voice soft and thick and mocking and eager. "Do you like my plan, Harry? When the wild Dark comes, I will lure it with the promise of a feast—you and Rosier, my faithless Rosier, both in exquisite pain and radiating Dark magic. Let it come close enough, however, and this child of the earth I have called will begin to swallow it. When it is engaged in fighting for its freedom, I will harness it as I should have been able to at Walpurgis. That you interrupted. This, you shall help me with."

"You're mad, Tom," Harry said, opening his eyes. Voldemort stood a little higher than he did, outlined against the sky—darkness above him, diseased light around him, white flesh beneath his feet. Harry could feel his power, and, beyond him, the growing pressure of the wild Dark. It was gathering its might now, sweeping towards the graveyard. "You can't hold the Dark. It will tear you apart. That's what it's come for, to punish you."

Voldemort laughed, a sound that Harry thought he should not have heard across the distance that separated them, but heard nonetheless. He could see the crimson eyes fastened on him now, radiating a light of their own, one that made the shadows deeper. "Harry, Harry, Harry. You know nothing of the deep, old magic that I have studied, the years I spent in pursuit of the Arts before I returned to Britain and Declared myself the Dark Lord. There are natural oppositions, natural patterns, in magic, and in other countries, they have preserved the knowledge of them better than wizards have here, with their mouths dumbly open and their gazes fixed on the sky. The earth opposes the air, even as fire opposes water, and it may hold the greatest of winds. I will harness the Dark. I only need sacrifices to draw its attention, and those I have."

Harry let out a huffing breath. He was not sure which he feared more: that Voldemort was fooling himself, and the wild Dark would break him and go on to wreak havoc and destruction across the British Isles and half Europe—or that Voldemort was telling the truth, and he might be able to tame the power of the wild Dark and use it.

Either way, it's up to me to stop this, he thought, and felt a helpless rage rising in him. If Voldemort weren't so mad, this would be a lot easier.

Thunder abruptly spoke from beyond the graveyard, and Voldemort laughed aloud and spread his arms. "The Dark is coming," he cried, "and who in all Britain stands to stop me? No Dark Arts can penetrate the wards I have woven, the preparations I have made, the spells I have raised—"

"Not the Dark," said a voice Harry knew, "but the Light. For even in the deepest Dark, the Light doth shine. Aurora ades dum!"

And it was as if dawn had come to the graveyard.

Chapter Fifty-Four: Even In The Deepest Dark, The Light Doth Shine

Harry swung his head so hard that he felt one of the vines actually tear in its grip on him. Indigena Yaxley shouted something. Voldemort erupted into a wordless snarl, and the basilisk, if not the worm, ripped into insults in Parseltongue. Rosier started laughing.

Harry could make no sound. His whole attention was imprisoned in the vision that had landed before him.

A mass of glaring white light filled the eastern end of the graveyard, spreading from the gates, and it dissipated Voldemort's wards and Dark magic as Harry had never seen anything do—unless it was the sun rising and dissipating morning mists. The darkness flowed back before it, and Harry thought he felt a twinge of discomfort from the wild Dark magic itself, though it grew confident again in the next moment. Sharp, piercing, stabbing like swords, the Light magic stalked a little further into the graveyard.

As Harry's eyes grew used to it, he could make out its shape. It radiated as sunbeams from a central core, and the core was focused around Augustus and the white wood staff he held. It was his voice that had called out the spell, then, Harry thought. Hardly surprising, since Augustus had said he would be the focal point for the cooperative ritual between the Light wizards.

Harry just hadn't expected them to get here this soon.

"Hello, Harry," said Augustus. Harry took a moment to realize what was different about his voice. It lacked the sneering, condescending undertone it had contained every other time Harry saw him. He now sounded purely happy. "I assume that you're in a spot of trouble and could use our help?" He raised his head and studied Harry, as if the presence of the vines and the worm hadn't already told him that.

Harry just nodded wordlessly, and then Voldemort broke the silence that had fallen between them. It was in that dirt-filled Parseltongue, and he commanded the worm to attack, kill, eat.

The white coils began shifting forward, turning towards the mass of churned earth and grass in front of the gates. Harry saw the rubbery flesh writhing, and cried out a warning in the moment before Yaxley's leaves wrapped around his mouth and made speech impossible.

Augustus laughed and called out a spell in a voice so high and ringing that Harry couldn't make out the invocation. The bands of gold on his staff shone as he turned it in the direction of the worm, and the white light focused and beamed sharply down.

The white flesh began to smoke where the light touched it, like a mass of ants with the sun focused on them through a glass. Harry heard a thin voice screaming, high enough to make blood run from his ears, and the creature shifted back from Augustus and the wizards that Harry could make out standing behind him, dim dark shapes in the fierce glow.

"No!" screamed Voldemort. "Attack them, hold them, swallow them! You must not allow yourself to be defeated!"

The great head dived, and then the graveyard seemed to spin as a mound of the worm's body traveled directly under Harry, aiming for his allies. He instinctively reached out, thinking he might be able to cripple the vines if the worm had disturbed their roots, but his wandless magic reached the limit of his skin and slammed back again. Harry hissed and tugged on his bonds, to no avail.

He did try another warning, though he wasn't sure how much good it did, given the gag on his mouth and all the other sounds flying around the graveyard.

The ground in front of Augustus trembled and collapsed inward, and then the worm's mouth was rising, a black hole filled with dirt, its fangs moving like deadly hairs. Augustus only laughed again and pointed his staff downward into the maw.

"Aurora ades dum!" he repeated. Harry realized what was going to happen, and hid his eyes just in time.

A second sunrise blossomed inside the worm's mouth. Its scream of pain made Harry scream in return. He had never heard any agony so primal, so bestial. The vines trembled again as the worm danced beneath them, and Harry tensed. But, when the creature had flowed past, they were still rooted. He braced his feet as best as he could with nothing to brace them on and resolved to wait for the moment when he could break free.

Voldemort shouted at the worm again, but it was busy hurting. Harry felt the moment when he changed his mind and decided to use his own magic on the interfering Light wizards instead. The intense dawn shining on his closed eyelids dimmed, and night answered it out of the Dark Lord.

Harry opened his eyes in time to see darkness extend like a flow of ink from Voldemort, eating the sunbeams it found. The worm stopped screaming as comforting blackness covered it. Harry supposed the blackness must resemble that of the underground tunnels Voldemort had bred the worm in.

Augustus stood unafraid in front of that looming wave. Harry, again twisting around as far as he could, made out Laura Gloryflower at his side, and Tybalt, and John, and Paton Opalline, and others that Harry suspected were Opalline relatives. None of them looked afraid, though he was distant enough from them to be mistaking some of their expressions.

Harry shivered. He wondered why they were so calm. They had created this ritual to defeat the wild Dark, not to defeat Voldemort. The Dark Lord could, presumably, still hurt them.

Then Augustus stabbed his staff down, and planted it in the earth. His voice had gone back to its usual scornful self, but this time, the contempt and condescension weren't buried. They rang in his voice, like the scream of an eagle that scorns the ground. "We have come in answer to impulses that you will never understand, Dark Lord." He turned his gaze to Harry, and aimed his staff at him. "Admisceamus dicionem nostram et accumulamus donis Harry Potter!"

Harry didn't know what that spell meant, and he didn't like the sound of it, especially when he felt the earth shaking with the power of it as it spilled out around Augustus. He couldn't exactly do anything about it, though, not when he was trapped by vines and Voldemort was bearing down on his allies. He gave another yank, hoping the vines might have loosened their hold while Yaxley was distracted by the antics of her Lord. The bonds tightened instead.

Then he discovered exactly what that spell did.

Augustus smiled as he felt the spell's power growing in him, whipping his blood to frenzy, filling his mind with light. The oil he'd smeared on his forehead earlier burst into flame, a star-like coruscation that called on the real stars and bade them answer. They still shone, beyond the clouds, and just because the Dark storm had covered them did not mean it could extinguish them.

The magic raced down his limbs, inexorable and majestic as the tide, spreading them out to the left and the right. Augustus lifted his hands, so that his staff could stay exactly where it was, hovering and beaming a straight cone of light into the center of the graveyard. He realized, distantly, that the worm might come back, and that the Dark Lord's power was heading for them, but those seemed petty concerns in the wake of this radiance growing inside and out. He closed his eyes.

He felt a warm hand rest on his arm, and a voice he hadn't heard in fourteen years murmured into his ear, "Shall we show them what Light is made of, Augustus?"

He did not open his eyes, knowing that he would not see Alba; he could only hear her. But he nodded and murmured back, "We shall."

Other stars burst into flame on other heads around him, as the Light wizards who had come with him—even his proud, impatient nephew—yielded to the flow of the spell and the ritual they had prepared, blending their magic into one pool. Augustus grew light-headed with the feeling that they stood on a shore of power. The waves leaped and surged to their heartbeats, bent and blended and

broke apart again, and still magic continued to pour in, drawn through the tattoos on Paton's skin that bound him to his relatives.

Then Augustus turned, and lifted his arm, still feeling Alba's clutching hands, and sent the whip of the ritual hunting across England, seeking out those Light wizards who might feel a loyalty to Potter and asking them two very important questions.

Rufus signed the request from Amelia Bones to use Veritaserum on Hestia Jones, and sighed, sitting back in his chair. He'd only managed to concentrate on paperwork for a few minutes at a time tonight, a shameful record for him. He kept turning his mind to the east and thinking about Little Hangleton, the graveyard, and the young Lord-level wizard who would be facing the wild Dark there in—a few hours? An hour? Now? It was impossible to tell. Since Rufus himself was devoted to the Light, he could feel the wild Dark only as a deep, shifting presence, a negation. He couldn't tell what it was doing. The first thing he would know of Harry's loss would be when the storm descended on London.

The Ministry did have evacuation plans in effect, and it had opened its doors to those homeless wizards in London who had nowhere else to shelter. Rufus had allowed those of his people who wanted to go home. Few had. They knew the wards on the Ministry were sturdier than those on their own houses. Some of them had not only stayed, but brought their families with them. Rufus could hear the laughter of children too young to understand what this night meant, running up and down the halls outside his office and playing tag.

He glanced over at Percy Weasley, who was flipping through a book of laws, trying to familiarize himself with all the edicts the Ministry had passed in the last ten years. Rufus permitted a small smile to cross his face. Weasley was still a trainee, but he was flying through the training. He'd be an Auror sooner than the normal three years it took, if that was possible.

Rufus turned back to the next piece of paperwork to be dealt with, and started. Staring at him out of the piece of parchment was a gryphon's face. In fact, the surface of his desk had turned into a deep well of light, and the gryphon gazed up out of that, its beak parted and its feathers blending into the sides of the well.

“What are you?” Rufus whispered, but he hadn’t finished his question before he heard a cry from Percy Weasley, and then a voice speaking in his head, too deep, too resonant, to be denied.

Are you loyal to the Light?

Rufus nodded. There was no question about that, and no reason to give any other answer than the truth. He’d been Declared for the Light since he was twelve years old, and in the more than fifty years since, he hadn’t once regretted his decision.

Are you loyal to Harry Potter?

Rufus nodded again, and then extended one arm, knowing without speech what he had to do; an almost magnetic force seemed to grab his arm and pull it there. The gryphon reared out of his paperwork, a shining form that didn’t belong in the rather dingy surroundings of the Ministry, and clenched its claws around his wrist. Then his magic ran out of him like blood, and Rufus slumped over his desk, dizzy.

“Minister?” Percy Weasley’s voice was thin and trembling.

Rufus looked up to see that the young man’s face was as white as parchment. Of course, he had one arm extended, too, and magic pounded out of him in a golden-white flood. It swirled into their desks and away. Rufus, if he concentrated, could feel it streaming east—

Towards Little Hangleton.

Harry had said that his Light allies were preparing a ritual they hoped would defend him. Rufus just hadn’t expected it to be so spectacular.

“It’s all right, Weasley,” he said, and then grabbed the edge of his desk with his left hand and held on. He was loyal to the Light. He was, come to that, loyal to Harry, so long as it didn’t mean abandoning the ideals of his Ministry. And this was a contribution to a conflict much greater than that between a Ministry and a Lord-level wizard.

He closed his eyes and opened the gates of his soul wider, giving all that he had to give.

Fiona Mallory sat shivering on the couch in her flat. She wasn't cold, not really—she still had her wand to cast warming charms, after all—but she still shook in shock, given what had happened to her a few hours before. Amelia Bones had returned her wand and told her, quietly, that she was sacked from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She shouldn't bother applying for another position in the Ministry, either; they would all know where she'd come from.

Fiona wished she could say it was worth it. She remembered little about her days under Dumbledore's compulsion spell, but she had had the sense of absolute righteousness. The decisions she made were not open to question. She did what she was required to do, always, and it had worked out. She had willingly sacrificed herself so that Lucius Malfoy could get away with his torture of the Potters, and certainly she had cursed them herself with the greatest pleasure.

Now, with the spell gone, she had to wonder if that righteousness had been an illusion, and if the ghost of it could support her against a lonely Christmas and the necessity of finding a new job.

When the wall tore apart and a gryphon's head projected towards her, Fiona accepted it as just one more illusion, one more dream. It was no stranger than the rest of her life lately.

But then the mighty voice spoke in her head, and shook her to her bones, and she answered that yes of course she was loyal to the Light, and of course she wished to help Harry Potter—he was like her, he had been abused and the last thing she had done to help him hadn't resulted in that much good—and she held up an arm, and magic rushed forth from her, and she felt her joy rising along with it, uncontrollable, exulting, so that she almost hoped she would die before she returned.

Minerva actually dropped her teacup when she felt the flood of magic traveling towards her. Godric, who stood on the other side of the room, floated through the floor in his surprise, then recovered himself and looked hastily at her, as though trying to reassure her that that didn't happen every day.

Minerva barely noticed. She stood up, her mind tingling inside her skull. It reminded her of the way Hogwarts's wards responded to her, but this was much greater than any of the wards. Hogwarts was a tame lake, and the wards surged in it like ripples, tiny waves, always dying when they reached the shore. This was a flood galloping down an ancient watercourse. Minerva knew what the watercourse must be, though she had never thought to see it invoked in her lifetime. The Light only interfered when called. Most Light wizards were content to know it was there and they had sworn their lives to it, and didn't bother calling it.

"Godric," she said. "Would you be willing to contribute some of your magic to help Harry? I suspect that the Light is about to ask you in a moment."

"The Light?" The Founder sounded bewildered. "I—"

The stones around them became transparent. Minerva heard cries of awe and terror, but she didn't know if it was her students, or if she heard the sounds she expected to hear, somewhere in her head. She stretched out her hands, her heart singing. This was the force she had once thought embodied in Albus, the one whose loss she had mourned, along with the loss of an old and true friend, when she found out how corrupt he was. At least feeling the Light around her gave her a glimpse of the certainty that she'd felt in the First War, the belief that there was something greater than any one mortal wizard, a set of ideals worth fighting for and which truly separated their side from the side of the Dark Lord. The more she discovered about what Albus had done, the further she traveled from that feeling, but now it was with her again.

She laughed, and when the questions echoed in her head, she held out her arm gladly. Still the laughter spilled from her lips, giddy and joyous, the laughter she remembered giving when she'd finally achieved the Animagus transformation.

When she saw Godric also standing with his arm extended to feed the flood, she smiled at him, and she could have sworn he blushed.

The Light thundered on. They stood on only one stretch of its banks, Minerva knew, and it had far to go.

Zacharias Smith was not surprised when the gryphon appeared before him, though the rest of his Housemates fled in terror, or at least drew back and shrieked; the Hufflepuff common room wasn't really suited for fleeing in terror. How could he be? He was the heir of his family, the latest in a long line of descendants from Helga Hufflepuff, and newly come into adulthood this year. He rose to his feet, and tugged Hermione with him when she might have sat on the couch staring at the enormous eagle's head and lashing lion's body that blended into a torrent of golden-white radiance. This was something that one should face on one's feet, unless one was a commoner—and while Hermione was Muggleborn, she wasn't common, and Zacharias didn't intend to permit her to act like it.

The gryphon dipped its head. Zacharias bowed back. The beak shone like diamond as it almost cut the floor. Zacharias allowed himself to be gravely impressed. The gryphon was as beautiful as some of the treasures in the Smith vaults. He saw no harm in admitting that, as long as he did not think it was more beautiful, which would be a betrayal of his family.

"Loyal to the Light?" he said in response to the first question. "I daresay I am."

"His name isn't actually Potter any more," he added, when the gryphon voiced the second question. "It's Harry. He renounced his last name. I just thought you should know that."

The eagle's eyes stared at him, and Zacharias coughed and conceded that such things were less important than others right now. He stretched out his arm, and let the Light take what it had come for. He glanced to the left and saw Hermione doing the same, and gave her a nod and a smile. She was a good student.

"I didn't do it for you," said Hermione.

Zacharias blinked. "Who did you do it for?" he asked, having to clutch at her as he swayed. The Light was drawing forth his magic

ferociously now. Of course it would. He was pureblood, and his family had been devoted to the Light for more than a thousand years. It would want to feast on that pure power, rooted in the strength of the earth and displayed forth in a beautiful body, if he did say so himself.

Hermione snarled at him—she was always doing that, and it was an endearing habit—and turned her fascinated gaze back to the white fountain that sprang from her arm and joined the rest of the Light as a rushing river.

Luna looked up when the Light asked her its questions. She thought about it, and then nodded. Of course she was loyal to Harry, at least if one phrased “loyalty” in a vague and convenient way. She was more loyal to the sylphs who danced during the solar eclipses, of course, but then, they’d made her promise and swear twice by her blood. And that was wild magic, anyway, neither Dark nor Light. This was the Light asking, and within those strict definitions, Luna had a greater devotion to Harry than anyone else.

A few of the other Ravenclaws in the Tower were contributing magic, too, she saw when she glanced around. Cho was practically glowing, as if she would make a fuss about it any moment. Luna didn’t see why. She propped her arm out of the way and returned to her book. It explained about hippogriff teeth that had an association with the dark of the moon rather than the full, and she had to learn about them while the moon was still dark, so she could go gathering them tomorrow night.

George sensed it first, but even as he lifted his head, he knew that his brother wasn’t far behind. They didn’t quite share a mind—that was just a trick they played at to fool the people who wanted to be fooled—but they had a closer bond than mere siblings, and the rush of the Light wasn’t exactly being subtle, was it?

When the Light asked them its questions, that was a little more complicated. George looked at Fred and asked, “Well, what do you think, Fred? Are we—”

“Loyal?” Fred chewed his lip. “I suppose so, but—”

“The least we could ask for is brand loyalty from Harry when we set up our shop,” George finished, nodding. “No more—”

“Buying from Zonko’s for him, exactly.” Fred grinned at him and held out his arm. George extended his, and identical streams of radiance burst from them, gushing into the Light that raced past. George had a brief vision of the two of them standing on the bank of a river filled with leaping flames. He grinned as he watched fiery foam leap into the air.

I bet we could make some fireworks that looked like that.

Ron swore and lowered his book. It was no good trying to read for bloody Defense Against the Dark Arts when they might not even be alive this time tomorrow night, was it? He was amazed that the professors had assigned homework, anyway. You’d think the Headmistress would have warned them off for once. If you don’t get a free night for facing imminent death from the wild Dark, what do you get it for?

He glanced around the Gryffindor common room. Other people had given up on trying to read at all, especially since Hermione wasn’t there to scold them into it. They whispered to each other, or glanced at the fireplace as if that would tell them the secrets of the future, or played Exploding Snap with shaking hands. Ron had to stifle the impulse to go interfere in a game of wizard’s chess that was going incredibly badly. He would have done better than that, even as nervous as he was. Ron had never understood why other people found chess so complicated. It was easy, and the patterns that predicted what would happen if a certain piece moved weren’t any harder than Quidditch strategies, which plenty of people understood.

“What do you think’s going to happen?”

Ron gratefully gave up pretending to study, and turned to Neville, who had taken the chair beside him and was anxiously rubbing his wrist. “I don’t know,” Ron told him. “I suppose Harry might be able to stop it, but—”

And then he gasped as he felt a warm feeling growing in his chest, a clasp of talons on his shoulders, a head bending and stroking hot feathers on his cheek. It felt like what he had always imagined Fawkes would feel like, if he actually decided to land on Ron's shoulder, but closer and larger.

Are you loyal to the Light? a voice asked, and Ron had the impression that the answer to that question would be the most important he ever gave. He nodded, dazedly, and the talons locked down on him as he got asked another important question. Are you loyal to Harry Potter?

For this, I can be, Ron thought, as he remembered how Harry had helped him break through the block on his magic last year, and held out his arm as the magic instructed him to. Then he caught a glimpse of a fiery river, and a gryphon flying in lazy circles above it, now and then stirring the flames with a kick of its legs or a flip of its wings. The vision was overwhelming, choking, and he jerked his head back.

He turned to Neville, wondering if he had seen that, too, and found Neville with his right arm extended and a beatific smile on his face, white magic pouring from his hand to join the stream.

"The Light asked me to help!" Neville whispered. "It actually asked me! It doesn't think I'm a coward!"

Ron managed to smile, and then he, too, lost himself in the wonder of actually doing something to battle the Dark.

Ginny jerked awake with a gasp as the Light came for her. She'd lain down on her bed to try and get a nap, never imagining she would succeed. How could she, when she was so worried about what might happen tonight, and if Hogwarts would still be standing, come morning?

But she'd fallen asleep, and for a moment she imagined the vision of white radiance was part of a dream. Then she realized it wasn't. No light she had ever dreamed was this harsh, this punishing, this—high. Ginny had the impression of incredible compassion, but not for any

one person. It was directed towards so many that individual sorrows made very little impact on it.

But now it was trying to save a great many people, and it was asking for her help, so her agreement mattered to it.

Ginny nodded in response to the questions. Connor had told her about how Harry had snatched Tom Riddle's diary out of her cauldron in Flourish and Blotts the summer before her first year at Hogwarts—the diary Lucius Malfoy had tried to put there, the diary that might have possessed her and forced her to open the Chamber of Secrets. Ginny couldn't know just what Harry had gone through with that diary possessing him instead, but she had some idea what he'd spared her from. She'd heard Connor talking to Ron about having Riddle in his head.

She owed him a debt, even if it was only for what might have happened. She stretched out her arm, and her magic joined the tide. Connor saw the Light not as a gryphon, not as a river the way he later heard people discussing it, but as a star. Perhaps that was because he was on the Astronomy Tower, gazing to the south, when it came for him.

It was the only connection he could have with his brother, looking up at the sky where the storm would descend from. Harry had absolutely refused to take him along, and while Connor had resented that, he could understand the logic. Full-grown adult wizards couldn't help Harry tonight, not unless their allegiance was to the Light and they agreed to take part in a certain cooperative ritual. How could another fifteen-year-old help?

Except that I'm Declared for Light now, Connor thought, well-aware that he was being mulish, and not caring. That should make a difference.

So he stood, and stared to the south, and tried to imagine himself in Little Hangleton and the graveyard, getting ready to fight the Dark Lord. Voldemort would make some stupid crack about using Connor for revenge on Harry the way he had at the end of third year, and Connor would respond that he could actually fight now, and

Voldemort would lift a hand and send a beam of dark fire at him, and Connor would dodge it, and then he would say...

A star on the horizon caught his attention. Connor blinked and leaned forward. He had thought there was no star there a moment before. No storm had come in as yet, but clouds blotted out all the light, even as they had during the day.

Nevertheless, a star stood there, bright as the spark in his twin's eyes when Harry went forth to confront some enemy to freedom. It spun and swirled and shone, and Connor heard the questions in his head.

"Yes," he breathed. "And yes." He lifted his arm, both so that the Light could touch him and in salute to his brother.

The magic roared around him, forth from him, a lightning bolt striking from the star and then leaping back again. Connor stood watching it as the gleam grew brighter and brighter, and then the Light shot away from it and towards the south.

A saying rose to his lips. He knew he'd heard it before, but he couldn't remember if it came from Sirius or his parents or Remus or the Headmistress, or maybe even Dumbledore.

"Even in the deepest Dark, the Light doth shine," he whispered, and then leaned forward, pouring all his heart and soul into the beam, hoping that Harry would feel that as well as the magic he was lending. Draco had almost given up on beating on the wards by the time the Light wizards appeared. Panic—for Harry—and hatred—for Voldemort—raked him with iron claws, but the wards held firm, no matter what he did. Snape, beside him, uttered curses in a low, steady voice, but they sparked and died against the snow that separated them from Harry.

Then that pompous Starrise showed up and ate through the wards with his Light, and Draco could get into the graveyard—but not very far in. Mounds of broken earth blocked his path, and the coils of some creature that stank and which Draco did not want to see face to face, and the Light wizards themselves. He heard the spell Starrise

chanted, and saw a beam race away cross-country, but his gaze was fastened on Harry. He'd finally located him past the brilliance of the sunrise, a small dark figure borne far too far above the ground, wrapped in vines.

He tried to run forward. Snape's arms wrapped around him like vines themselves, and his father's hand gripped his shoulder and squeezed. It was his father who spoke, voice thick and harsh. "No one can do anything for him yet, Draco. Just wait. The Light wizards are helping him."

"I have to," said Draco intently, struggling. He understood how Harry felt now, those times when he should have given up and lain back and let someone take care of him, but he just couldn't. He had to move, had to get up there, had to use Diffindo to cut the vines and Wingardium Leviosa to catch Harry as he fell. It wasn't a want, it was a need. His father and Snape meant well, but they couldn't understand. "It won't take long. Just a moment."

"You can't, Draco," his mother whispered, and her arms joined Snape's in wrapping him round. "We'll have to wait, and hope that the ritual the Light wizards performed actually worked."

The doubt in her voice inspired Draco to new heights of kicking and squirming. He didn't understand why he couldn't get free. When he was a child, he'd delighted in wrestling free of the house elves who tried to grab him and bring him back under control. That had been before his father began his pureblood training, of course, but surely he hadn't lost all his skills in the intervening years?

After a few more moments, he understood that it wasn't his skills that had decayed; it was his parents'—and his Head of House's—that had improved. They were keeping him here because they were terrified for him, terrified that he would die if he ran forward and tried to help Harry now.

It's very simple, Draco thought. I have to do this. It's not a choice. I love him, and I have to be at his side.

He finally thought to reach for his wand, but a hand clamped down on his arm and stopped him. He looked up to see his father staring at him with a white face. Lucius shook his head, once.

“You don’t understand,” Draco said, suddenly sure that they would if he could just explain it rationally. He would show how good his pureblood training was, how calm and composed he remained even under intense pressure. “I have to. That’s just the way it is. That’s just the kind of commitment that Harry and I have made to each other. He’d come get me. I have to go get him. Excuse me.”

He twisted to the side, then dropped to his knees, forcing Snape and his father to loosen their holds. Then he rolled, and Narcissa, already bent at an awkward angle to clutch his arms, lost him. Draco bounced back to his feet, ignored the mud clinging to his trousers, and ran straight for the vines and for Harry.

His mind churned in his skull as he ran, and he knew that he had to reach a patch of ground free of ditches and gaps so that he could safely use his possession gift. His body collapsed like a limp rag when he was gone from it. He and Harry hadn’t been able to figure out a way to stop that from happening, so he had to make sure that he couldn’t tumble down and crack his head when he leaped.

He reached a patch of grass that seemed as good as any, and knelt. Then he looked up and into the face of the witch who stood under the vines holding Harry. Now and then she shook her head, and appeared quietly amazed.

Draco flung his mind like a spear straight at her. He felt the familiar whirling tumble of being inside another mind, the sudden weight of strange skin, the pull of muscles unlike his own—Harry was a fifteen-year-old boy and fairly close to his own height and weight, but this was a woman in her forties—the shift and lift of limbs that all wanted to fly in different directions. To make it worse, this witch recovered from her surprise fairly quickly and started to fight back.

Draco ignored her, though. He and Harry had concentrated on general principles of possession, rather than on commands too specific to any one body, and he knew how to move a right hand. He

rotated it sharply, and the vines turned and bore Harry towards the ground.

The witch in his head pushed at him. Draco could ignore that, too, for now. He waited until the vines landed and their leaves opened from Harry's arms. Harry scrambled to his feet at once, his gaze fastened on the witch.

Draco rejoiced on looking into his boyfriend's eyes, until he realized that Harry was gathering his strength, and part of that wandless magic would certainly blast straight at him. He leaped out, just as the witch made another bid to retain control of herself, and traveled back to his own body. He rolled over, blinking and rubbing his brow; he had a ferocious headache, though part of that might have come from the way his mother was yelling into his face, loud enough to break an eardrum.

He looked back in time to see the tidal wave of Light gallop through the graveyard and slam straight into Harry.

Harry knew when Indigena Yaxley's vines suddenly released him that Draco must have possessed her. He couldn't see her turning from Voldemort on her own. He surged to his feet, grateful to have control of his own magic back, and then looked to the east. He knew what was coming.

A tracery of light would extend across the British Isles, and maybe across half Europe, too, if one counted Opalline relatives into the equation. Argutus's vision had been correct, Harry thought.

He saw the gleam of the wave's foam, and then the wave itself, tearing through the middle of the Light wizards. It hit the tip of Argutus's staff, and then focused. Harry braced himself as best he could. Had he had any idea what this ritual entailed, he would have suggested a different one, but it was too late now.

Voldemort's darkness covered him, swayed, and then struck downwards.

The Light hit Harry.

He felt the magic of more than a hundred witches and wizards flood him, freely given up, freely donated. Harry's body became no more than a suggestion of outline. His eyes tingled, and he could see everything: the bones of the earth, the veins inside the vines, the thoughts swarming beneath the surface of Indigena Yaxley's mind and Voldemort's and Rosier's.

He lifted a hand, and feathers of power sprouted from his fingers, stroking apart Voldemort's attack as though it didn't matter. Dizzy, floating, Harry made a leap in the air and felt himself come down slowly, the way that Muggles were supposed to on the moon. He turned to face Voldemort.

He could do anything at the moment, but he was also filled with the Light's compassion and tenderness of temper, and he found that he rather pitied the man who stood before him, all his genius turned to pathetic ends, all his estimation of himself gone false. He imagined that he could harness the wild Dark, and that was not true. No mortal could do that.

"Tom," he said. In his voice, bells rang. Beneath him, the earth rang where he trod. Power rippled beneath his skin, but Harry remembered, always, that it was not his, and that he had it for a purpose. Defeating the Dark was that purpose, but the Dark storm was only building now, and he had a Dark Lord to deal with first. "Will you give up and go quietly?"

Tom, Voldemort, Dark Lord, laughed at him, and in the laugh were the hundred hisses of a snake. "Why should I?" he cried. "You are nothing but a child, and I will see you destroyed. Abi!"

Harry felt the corkscrew of magic that struck at him then. It was meant not only to rend him apart, but make it as if he had never existed. This was not a traditional spell, but a deep desire of Tom's, given form by his will and insulation by the Latin invocation.

Harry raised his hand, carefully. The corkscrew broke apart in the face of his own desire, and Tom stared at him. Harry felt a more intense pity well up in him. Really, Tom's form spoke to the damage

Dark magic had done to him. It had blurred his features, melted them and sent them sliding down his face. And it had done the same thing to his mind, only with more violence. Harry had to feel for him. He had caused pain, but he had suffered it, as well.

And he could not stand against what Harry was about to do to him.

“Tom,” Harry said softly. “You are gone from here. You cannot snare the wild Dark. Your worm is dead, collapsed back into the pieces of dead flesh it was created from. Your servants are with you, and unable to cause any more harm to Muggles tonight. You cannot do anything for tonight but brood.” It was not the harsh punishment Tom deserved, the Light knew, but too far, and Harry would find himself using compulsion. He did not want to do that. He would not give up all that he was for the sake of stopping Voldemort. One night’s peace, enforced as much to protect Voldemort from the wild Dark as to protect them all from him, was the limit of what he could do.

As he spoke each thing, it became true. The Light spread around him and fused the night into glass and diamond. Tom vanished. Indigena Yaxley vanished, sent to the same place he was. The worm broke apart, stitches showing clearly where the segments had been threaded together, greasy gray fire consuming it as it sprawled in death. Harry raised his hand higher, and the white force, song and fire and goodness and loyalty, flared around him. Harry had never seen a sight so beautiful as this dawn in the middle of the longest night.

For one moment, all was peaceful. Voldemort’s trap was dissipated, and the ritual had worked to grant him the power needed to defeat the Dark Lord. Harry breathed clear air.

Then the night shook.

Harry lifted his head.

And he knew it had done no good, no good at all, as streams of thunder raced from all four corners of the sky and coiled above him, splitting and dancing and weaving back together again into reaching tendrils of power. The Dark had come, and it was mightier by far than

the Light magic of mortal wizards. And this was the Dark's night, the time when the sun was furthest away from the northern hemisphere, a time of the dark of the moon, a night of clouds blocking out the light of the stars and preventing it from reaching the earth. There was nothing the Light could do to stop it.

The Dark was amused that he had tried; Harry could feel its amusement like a hand pressing against his body. And it would stay and play with him for a bit before it broke past his feeble defense and attacked the rest of Britain. He had made a good showing. It was too bad that good showing could not be permitted to stop the storm.

Harry stood there, the gathering wind sending his hair behind him, and felt the cold of acceptance curdle in his belly. This was a contest he was doomed to lose. The Dark was simply too strong for him to fight, and this time, unlike in Henrietta's story, it would not lose interest and wander away. It would cause thousands of deaths before the dawn came to stop it. The Dark rejoiced and crooned in the thoughts of those deaths, and more so because Harry himself wanted so very badly for them not to happen.

Harry knew they would happen. But he had to try to stop them. He drew in his own magic, and his borrowed Light power, determined to send a strike into the sky and catch the Dark's attention. Perhaps he could wound it.

Then wings beat above him, two sets of them. Harry heard a song like thunder and a song like strength, and he lifted his head again, focusing his eyes this time on something other than the Dark's display of power.

One of the shapes was very much larger and blacker than the other. It stooped at him, and Harry made out wide leathery wings, dark scales, eyes golden as madness. The Hungarian Horntail landed beside him with a sweep of her spiked tail, her claws delicately straddling the broken earth, and extended a wing towards him. Harry knew he was supposed to mount.

The other shape circled his head like a comet, singing all the while. Harry saw Fawkes, and Fawkes's dark eyes gazing at him, and

Fawkes's crimson feathers bobbing; he had turned deep red all over, like spilled blood or the heart of summer.

Harry took a deep breath, and a step forward, and a moment to pause and hope. Then he was running up the leathery wing. It was stiff as a ramp, and bounced only slightly where he stepped. He settled into a dip on the dragon's back, and fastened his hand on the spikes in front of him. It hurt to grip them, but he was used to riding his Firebolt using only his knees now. He thought he could manage with the Horntail.

Fawkes sang again, and the dragon opened her mouth and sang, and then they rose, hurtling upwards into the heart of the storm.

Chapter Fifty-Five: Till Earth-Life Grow Elysian There

Harry felt the winds close around him as they rose, curling under his robes, playing with the hem of his jumper, skimming his skin like teeth bared just enough to hurt. He shivered, and then resolutely opened his eyes and peered upwards. The wild Dark had chosen to take the form of rain, not of snow, so the air could not be as cold as it normally would be in winter. He would not allow the wild Dark to reverse its orientation now, and pretend to be something it was not.

Not that it seemed to be pretending as he rose to meet it. It spread its claws wide, and shrieked at him, and he saw the same ill-defined body he had seen when it attacked him that night outside Hogwarts.

The Hungarian Horntail stopped rising and spread her wings, hovering. Harry wondered why for a time, then realized that she saw little reason to close with an enemy in air of his choosing. She would wait here for the strike, where the winds were less violent and the wild Dark would have to come at them nearer to the bottom of its own cloud.

The wild Dark laughed, as if it could sense every thought in the dragon's head and disdained them all, and then it came for them.

Harry felt a shuddering power slam through him, as though he were back in the dream—of the graveyard, he knew now—where this creature had hit him with its neck. Pain followed pain like bruise following bruise, but he knew he didn't just bear bruises now. He had broken ribs. He coughed, and the Light fluttering in the heart of him answered with its best flare.

The wild Dark coiled around him, black scale next to black scale, pale belly arching for yards above his head. Then its claws reached out, and plucked the Light magic Harry's allies had sent him.

Harry sagged as the power left him. He turned his head to see the wild Dark ball it up into a tiny white bundle and toss it contemptuously down through the storm. Clouds parted for it, and then it was gone.

A voice spoke into his mind as if it would smash his skull to pulp. Here is only the Light you bring with you—your gifts, not your borrowings.

The claws closed around Harry's waist and snatched him from the dragon. Then the Dark was flying, heading straight up so fast that Harry felt his lashes freeze and his ears pop several times. The roar of the dragon was so far behind them that it quickly became indistinguishable from the roar of the winds. Harry could not hear Fawkes at all.

Here we are.

"Here" was evidently the top of the cloud, the top of the storm. Harry looked around, blinking dazed eyes—somehow, his glasses had not fallen off—and saw the lights of Little Hangleton off to one side. Directly below, bits of stone danced like leaves in an eddy. The storm must have uprooted the graves, he thought.

"What do you want of me?" he asked. The wind blew away his words the moment he formed them, but Harry had no doubt that the Dark heard him. Those golden eyes and serpentine neck cocked to look at him.

Your attention. Your admiration. It is wrong that you are always thinking of other things, and not of me. The Dark's tone had a wild petulance to it that reminded Harry of Connor when he didn't get a favorite sweet. When you have paid enough attention to me, then I will suck out your magic, and you will become a wind. I will show you all the dark spaces between the stars. They contain mysteries that no mortal has ever seen. You will like them.

"I can't leave my friends, the magical creatures, my home," Harry said quietly. He didn't know if reason was the best course to try on the wild Dark, but fighting had got him absolutely nowhere. "Those are all my duties, as well. I can try to give you more attention than I have, but if you insist on all of it, then you're depriving others of the same gift that you want."

The wild Dark laughed at him. Harry felt another rib break, but he couldn't tell if that came from the laughter or the tightening grip of the claws on him. He held still and tried to breathe as shallowly as he could. Broken ribs hurt so badly.

I do not care about the others. You are a Lord-level wizard, and you can pay attention to me and give gifts to me. We will go shake the stars when we are done here, and make the stars fall down. We will dance with the winds, and freeze the winds and turn them into ice crystals and leave them for future Muggles to discover. We will coat the world with night for three nights and allow no sun to rise. We will be free, and you cannot blame me for that, because you are freedom's servant.

Harry could see why there were Declared Dark Lords in that moment. Most of them probably hadn't Declared with the intention of conquering the world like Voldemort and Grindelwald had, even though that was what ended up happening. Many of them had probably wanted the secrets the Dark was promising, the questions parting to become answers, the endless freedom of venturing into corners of the universe that no one else would dare to probe.

But the road of the wild Dark was no more human than the road of the highest Light. Go with it, Harry knew, and he would lose what he most valued: his own sense of limitations on himself, the knowledge of when to use his power and when to cage it, his own tendency to hesitate instead of simply imposing his will on the world. He would become all "I can, and I want to, and therefore I should," and judgment would be alien to him.

"I don't want to do this," he said.

I know you don't. Your unwillingness tastes sweet. An enormous tongue flapped above him, like a black version of Voldemort's worn. But I will consume it, and it will become willingness, and then you will see what I see. For now, look down.

Harry looked down. He could have refused and kept looking straight, he knew, but then the wild Dark would have interfered with his vision and made him see what it wanted him to see anyway. If he got out of

this alive—and a small part of him said that he might—Harry wanted his normal vision.

The land beneath him throbbed and changed like lightning in the midst of the storm, like wind or water. Harry saw houses dancing on their foundations, the hill outside Little Hangleton rippling up and down as though an army of worms moved beneath it, lights going out one by one as the enormous hand of the Dark stroked them into silence and darkness. He noticed a shape flying parallel to them, too, a grand shape, and tried to turn his eyes away and not notice it. The dragon was following them, waiting for a chance to strike. He didn't want the wild Dark to see her.

That thing? Oh.

And there came a violent snapping sound, and when Harry looked at the dragon, she was dead, her head lolling on her neck, her wings spread and shredding as particles of ice tore through them, her talons fluttering as though she played a tune. The wild Dark heard Harry's little pathetic cry of anguish, and laughed. Harry spun around twice in its glee.

You care, don't you? You still care. You look down at the land and you think more of them than you do of me. For a moment, the enormous voice was displeased, but it recovered its cheerfulness soon enough. I'll keep you caring, for a little while. You're fun when you're in pain.

Harry closed his eyes. There had to be some way he could defeat the storm. This wasn't like the situation with Durmstrang and the children trapped there, where he would handle it best by leaving it up to other people. There was no one but him who stood a chance of stopping the wild Dark. Voldemort was out of the way, and his allies could not send power to him from beyond the winds.

Here is only the Light you bring with you, the Dark had said.

Was that a clue?

Harry reached into the center of himself, trying to think of all the Light he knew. He turned his thoughts away from things like the green fire of the Killing Curse. There was the white radiance that had saved Connor's life at the end of first year, and the light of fire in the hearth at Godric's Hollow as the family sat around it telling stories, and the brilliant fireworks exploding behind his eyes when he and Draco kissed, and the sunrise when he swam with the unicorns on the sea—

The wild Dark shook him, and he lost the thread of his thoughts. When he opened his eyes, the wild Dark said, I thought you would like to see this. You did dream of protecting them from me, after all.

Harry had to look again, and he saw a Muggle woman being decapitated, wind sharp as a steel sword sweeping her head from her body. Harry made an inarticulate noise, especially when the wind blew knowledge of him up to her. She had lived in Little Hangleton, and her name was Marie, and she had a daughter named Sarah, and she was concerned about money, scraping it together, just barely making a living selling her paintings.

She would make no paintings ever again. She would never smile at Sarah again, or look out the window at a sunrise she'd seen after hours of being up to create, or do anything but drift as pieces in the Dark's grip, frozen meat, a victim of forces that Harry should have been able to keep away from her and had not.

"Stop!"

The wild Dark laughed in delight at the force of Harry's cry. It turned its gaze from the other floating Muggles, awaiting death with terror on their faces, to him. The dark tongue came into being again, and curled, as if tasting and savoring Harry's anguish.

Yes?

"What can I offer you to make you stop doing this?" Harry whispered. He felt the strength piling up behind him, and knew there was more where that came from. This was only the beginning, the Muggles it was killing and the houses it had pulled down so far. The wild Dark

had not used the smallest part of its magic. The dawn would stop it, but it was the longest night of the year, and dawn was hours away. "What do you want of me that would make it worth your while to spare these Muggles and their homes?"

The wild Dark cocked its head reflectively. There are many things you might give me, it said. So many things that I will have to think of them—no, no, I need not. The first thing you can give me is a Declaration to the Dark. Become a Dark Lord.

Harry shivered, and saw his hopes for his future as vates collapse. "You know what I am," he said.

I do. The Dark bounced like an overexcited child. That is what makes this so much fun!

Harry swallowed, and swallowed, and swallowed again. His eyes locked on the drifting Muggles in the Dark's care. He saw Sarah, the dead woman's daughter; he knew her as well as Marie would have, with Marie's memory in his head now. Her eyes were wide, and she choked on tears. In her own life, she laughed and cried and was frustrated and grew angry, but here, all emotions save horror had been wiped out of her. No one should have to live like that.

But no one should have to live like the magical creatures, either, imprisoned under webs that stripped all sense of possibility from their futures. And if he Declared now, then he would be taking their best chance at freedom from them. He knew neither Dumbledore nor Voldemort would become vates, and he had no chance of knowing when another Lord-level wizard might emerge.

I grow bored, the Dark announced, and snapped Sarah's neck. She joined her mother as a dangling bit of trash in its currents, all the life and possibility fled her in an instant.

"All right!" Harry shouted, the words torn from him by the vision of more Muggles, and wizards, and witches, and magical creatures, dangling like that. "Damn you, all right!"

The Dark purred at him and coiled around him. We will do this correctly, it said. A full Declaration to the Dark is a ritual, you know, and not just a matter of announcing your new allegiance. I will show you all the steps, and you will dance them. A stage, flat and white, appeared beneath Harry's feet, then sprouted decorations of mottled gray. Around him, the wind stopped blowing, and Harry staggered as he landed, wincing as his ribs jostled and poked him. First, you must stand, and turn to the west. That is the proper ritual direction, since the sun sets there.

Harry rose and turned shakily to where he thought the west was. The storm approved in a deep rumble, and said, Now raise your right arm.

Harry lifted his right arm. He felt hatred dance in his veins like boiling water, and forced himself to breathe. The Dark would win a victory indeed if it made him hate it. He would not hate it. The wild Dark alone was making him hate it. The other parts of the Dark, the parts that wizards like Snape had seen and chosen to serve, were just as worthy of love and devotion as the Light.

But it's Light I need now.

The storm said, Raise your left—

The Dark didn't get to complete its instruction, because its words melted in a flood of song. Harry turned his head. He saw a flake of gold blowing towards him up the rogue winds beyond the stage, bright wings spread, song traveling before and behind it and seeming to smooth the air.

The wild Dark laughed. Your phoenix has come to say farewell to you. Of course, a phoenix will not serve a Dark wizard. How sweet. I am inclined to permit this, just so that you will have no distractions when you are completing the ritual. Listen to his pretty little song, then, Harry.

Harry fastened his gaze on Fawkes. The phoenix had tears in his eyes, and Harry wondered why. Had he tried to heal the dying Muggles? Had he tried to heal others Harry didn't know about, those people he should have managed to protect and had not?

He winced, and Fawkes answered him with a croon, as much to say that that had not been his fault and he was silly for thinking otherwise. Harry nodded. He kept his right arm up, since moving it might make the Dark rethink its permission for Fawkes to sing. He stood there, and awaited the last sound he suspected he would ever hear as a free wizard.

Fawkes spread his wings wide, looking more like an eagle than a phoenix in that moment, and started with a low warble. It rose from deep in his belly, traveled up his throat, and left his beak as shining notes. Harry saw them form and fall, drops of rain like honey. He could not see what happened to them. They seemed to part and become golden steam moments after they were born.

In the middle of them, Fawkes sang, and Harry saw endless golden pastures, shifting with flames. No, they were flowers, bowing and dancing in time to a wind he could not feel, their gauzy petals clasping each other, their stems entwining, their red centers opening to the sun. When the sun rose fully, then they burst into flame, but Harry knew that, even as they burned, they would resurrect themselves during the night, ready to complete a daily cycle.

Like the phoenixes.

There were phoenixes flying above those pastures, their tails outstretched behind them, their plumes bobbing, their talons tucked close to their breasts. Harry heard their voices answering each other, one song prompting a hundred others, warble answering warble, croon answering croon, and he had tears in his eyes as he watched one rise out of all of them and look towards the east.

That one was Fawkes.

The vision superimposed the imaginary bird over the real thing, and then Harry was looking at Fawkes again as he was here, as he hung suspended in the middle of this monstrous darkness and sang his heart out.

The music altered, leaping faster and faster, swirling like a tame waterfall down a series of steps. Harry could see a vision of that, now, as Fawkes sat beside such a cataract and drank from it by the light of the full moon, the moon itself reflected in the water but continually broken and disrupted by the coming of a new rivulet.

A free unicorn came to the cataract, shining like wonder. She had never known imprisonment. Beside her stood a foal who had never known it either, and who tossed his head and snorted in excitement at the song of the waterfall. It was music he had never heard before. He began an awkward dance to it, flecks of foam on his coat giving back the moonlight. Fawkes voiced notes he could dance more easily to, and phoenix and river, fire and water, sang together under the moon while the foal danced and the unicorn mare bowed her head and drank, her horn cleaving the waterfall into wilder and wilder reflections.

A blink, and the vision dissipated again. Harry looked up at Fawkes hanging above him, and wondered why the phoenix had chosen to share that with him. Was it a dear memory that he wanted Harry to retain when he was gone? A particularly beautiful shard of Light to clutch when he was all Dark?

Fawkes gazed back at him, eyes wild and black and wise, and then did a half-turn to the left and began another part of the song.

This time, Harry saw the stars. They shone like gems in a mine, but they were the stars, though shaken and rung as Harry had never imagined could happen. He could see immense silver strings running from them, and giant fingers flashing between them, and he realized he heard the harp of the stars being played. Was it real? At least as real as the way that wizards and witches saw the stars, he thought, for this was the way that a phoenix saw them.

Fawkes flew under the stars, and beside him was a creature Harry had never seen before, a winged horse made of silver wire and filled in with silver light. His wings rose and fell with a noise like flutes, just barely audible beneath the sound of the harp of the stars. His tail looped and curled, a shining river of diamonds, down into the night, and his mane brushed Fawkes like the scent of flowers. He flew, and

whatever turn Fawkes made, whatever loop he curled, whatever straight-up ascent he executed at an impossible angle, the winged horse was right there beside him. Harry knew, as he watched, that this was a fragile creature, though incredibly strong while he existed, a child of the stars destroyed by the music's ending or a cloud passing over the light that bore him. Even for a phoenix, this was a rare night, a wild night.

That vision, too, ended, and Harry blinked at Fawkes and wondered again why the phoenix had shared that. Fawkes's visions were usually not only shorter, but clearer in their import. What message did he mean Harry to carry into darkness? Was it really just a way of saying farewell?

It couldn't be, Harry thought. The visions were too regular, too detailed. And they all contained creatures that he had never seen before, except for the one with the unicorns—and that contained unicorns who had never known the touch of a wizard's hand or a wizard's web. Fawkes would not be so cruel as to remind him of all he was giving up by making the Declaration for Dark. So it must be something else. What?

And then he knew, and felt like a fool for not seeing it earlier. One vision of the sun, one of the moon, one of the stars. Fawkes was showing him all the different kinds of Light.

But why?

Harry frowned, and Fawkes crooned. Then he spread his wings wide and began to dance.

Harry watched him. His heart ached as Fawkes continued, for with every shake of scarlet plumes, golden crest, coruscating blue tail, he knew another moment passed, and he traveled closer and closer to giving up everything he was so that others would not be hurt. Sacrifice had never seemed so bitter.

Fawkes tilted his neck and let fall another stream of honey-colored notes, as if to scold Harry for being so negative. Harry swallowed and tried to stand straighter. Fawkes was right. He had made his choice,

even if it was under duress. He couldn't blame the phoenix, even if he had chosen the visions to show Harry what he would never have. The phoenix had done an enormous amount of work to help advance his cause as vates. He had the right to be disappointed that Harry had chosen continued life for some over freedom for all the magical creatures.

The phoenix grew brighter and brighter, deeper and deeper. Harry could hear his song rising in crescendo, and knew the moment was coming when it would finish, and he would have to say farewell. He swallowed again, and tried to brace himself, determined that no tears would cloud his voice in the final moment.

Fawkes spread his wings wide, and turned entirely gold. Harry tried to hide his eyes, and could not. Light flared, dazzling in the midst of the darkness, a second sunrise, like the one Augustus had brought to the graveyard far below.

Abruptly, the Dark screamed. No! You cannot! This is not allowed! This cannot be done!

Fawkes, in the midst of a spin, spread his wings wider, and wider still. By now, Harry knew they were longer than they actually were, and suspected they had begun to blend into the light the phoenix shed. He still could not hide his eyes, and still, somehow, he could see, rather than his vision going dark the way he thought it should have. Wider, and wider, and Fawkes seemed all wing and scarcely any body, dancing, a shadow against the gold.

The light soared. The song soared. Harry thought they were twinned, and when one died, so would the other. He knew his right arm was shaking from being held aloft for so long, but it did not seem important.

Fawkes sang. Fawkes danced. Harry could hear the tenor of his music now—or perhaps he had merely become better at reading the phoenix's mind, after the visions that had let him see more of his past life. The song had passed a lament and escalated into a celebration. Perhaps for the things Harry had done when he was still free?

No! the Dark screamed again.

The sunrise grew. Harry thought of the meadows far away covered with immortal blossoms, and all the phoenixes flying. He wondered if Fawkes would ever return there.

The song turned.

Harry felt it come for him like an arrow.

Fawkes sang. Fawkes danced. The song was more than a celebration now; it was a triumph, a symphony of joy. Harry heard notes in the music he would not have thought it possible to achieve, springing up the scale of delight, soaring and finding their place in a dazzling array of exaltation.

Light welled all around him, deep and tender, a spreading hand of gold in the midst of the darkness.

Harry felt it surround him, slam into him, fill him. Fire swelled beneath his chest. Wings lifted from his shoulders. Golden-white force of being fledged him and made him begin to burn.

Fawkes sang. Fawkes danced. Harry could feel him intimately now, as if the bond in his mind that connected him to the phoenix had spread to encompass the whole of his body, as if Fawkes were becoming only song and only dance and only light, as if they vibrated in harmony.

Fawkes sang. Fawkes danced. Harry felt him climb, spiraling, looking to the stars that shone beyond the clouds, which the Dark storm could dim but not extinguish.

And then Fawkes gave his life away.

Harry felt him die, assumed into the light, ascending into the dawn, a joyous and a willing sacrifice, a gift permanently passed to Harry, rather than borrowed, as the magic from his allies had been.

The Dark screamed in anger, in terror, in fear.

Harry lifted his hand, and it spread feathers of light, the way it had earlier, when he faced Tom. Wings beat from his shoulders, and he felt his face mold and bend into a beak as hard as diamond. His eyes sharpened, his sight turning almost painfully clear. His fingers curled and hardened, and his body slid into a long, sleek shape—lion, he knew, without being told. He felt feathers and fur nip together in the middle of his back, joining. He spread his wings and screamed.

He was a gryphon, the gryphon of the Light—the Light, called and given passage into the middle of the Dark storm by the death of Fawkes, a creature of ultimate Light, the gift of his fire acting as a gateway, doubled or tripled in power by the willing sacrifice of it. For a phoenix, a creature that might live forever, dying and being reborn, to give up his life and interrupt the cycle, was something that snared the Light's attention. And that death was powerful enough to call it forth on this longest night of the year, this night without a moon, into the heart of the Dark storm.

The Dark had said, Here is only the Light you bring with you—your gifts, not your borrowings.

And the Light had been given, and the Light had come.

Harry swam somewhere in the middle of it, his mind ablaze with grief and rage and joy, strands of diamond intermingled with the gold. He felt himself lift, gryphon and human and Light all at once, mortal and immortal and force, and fly forward. The storm was breaking around him. The clouds were no longer thunderheads, but the clouds of sunrise, clinging to the beams but always dissipated by them, melting away before the birth of day and the death of night.

The Dark was revealed now, a looping, ungainly body clumsier than any dragon, retreating hastily before the flying gryphon. Harry wondered why for a moment, and then had his answer, handed to him before he could wonder. So long as it hid, the Dark could draw substance from the night and the storm around it, and appear as graceful as it wished. With the radiance eating into and destroying it, it had to make do with what clumps of black flesh it could gather.

The gryphon slammed into the Dark, and tore through it. Aurora ades dum, Harry thought, as he felt his enemy shred before talons that were and were not his own. Dawn come hither.

Dawn had come, at least in this place, and as the Dark lashed and hissed and tried to fight back, it kept returning. It shone from every flash of the gryphon's feathers; it pulsed in every return of Harry's grief for Fawkes; it leaped from cloud to cloud like the lightning. The sky they fought in was golden and black, and Harry could feel the Dark's influence retreating, falling away like torn rags, no sturdier than the petals of the phoenix flowers in their faraway meadows.

It retreated only so far and no farther, but that was all right. The Dark could not be stronger than the Light, only as strong. It had broken the laws and disobeyed the rules by gathering up so much power and storming across Britain like this. The Light, which did obey the laws and the rules, had had to have the invitation of mortal and immortal creatures to counter it, but now that it was here, it pinned the Dark to the air and forced it to acknowledge that dawn would come again, that Midsummer would come again, that even as the sun danced far away in the longest night, it was already making the turn that would see light come back once more. Tomorrow's night would be a little shorter than this one, and on, and on, and on, the summer and the season rising, in the endless dance of dances.

The wild Dark wailed, at last, scolded like a naughty child before the gryphon's claws. There were parts of it that were majestic, and strong, and even lovable, Harry thought, deep in the Light, but not this one. It wailed, and sobbed, and agreed to the Light's terms, and the storm broke.

For a moment, the gryphon hung in the midst of the vanishing clouds, gold tearing the black apart, a second sunrise in a night that would not see a sunrise for a very long time yet. And then the Light began gently to separate itself from Harry, brushing his face with its feathers and rubbing his neck with its beak, healing his ribs as it transformed them. Now that the Dark was defeated and the laws of the world set in balance once more, it had no right to stay.

Harry closed his eyes as grief came back to him, as he lost the perspective that one had by existing forever. The Light boiled all around him, a stream of steam and white in mourning for Fawkes, Sarah, Marie, the dragon. It could have been so much worse, and those were the terms in which the Light thought, but it understood that they did not comfort Harry.

The wind bore him gently to the ground, and Harry landed in the middle of the graveyard, catching himself with his knees and his hand. He kept his head bowed. He was certain that his allies stood around him, but he could not bear to meet their eyes as yet.

“Harry?”

That was Draco’s voice, and he only spoke when a moment had passed, meaning Harry was more ready to look. He blinked at him, and then realized the night was brighter than it should have been. He glanced down.

Pale fire shone through his skin, reflections of red and gold and white and blue that seemed to come from far away. Harry drew a deep breath. He knew it was Fawkes’s gift. He wondered how long it would last. Not long, he thought. He was no phoenix, to die and be reborn. Perhaps it would last only the night, or one burning cycle, and then be gone.

While he was like that, he probably had some phoenix gifts. He could do nothing to heal the dead, but there was one here who needed healing. The pain spoke from behind him, a wrongness in the world.

Harry turned and looked up. Yaxley’s thorns still writhed around the graves, and in the middle of them still hung Evan Rosier. Harry lifted his hand, and the fire spread around his fingers and then emerged into a misty, five-pronged shape, part human and part phoenix claw and part gryphon talon. It drifted forward and began to puff the thorns that twined into Rosier’s face and back and sides gently into ash.

Harry stood there, watching. No one said anything. Draco gripped his shoulder, once, but didn’t speak. Harry was grateful for it. He watched Rosier’s dazed face as the pain ceased, little by little, and then the

five-pronged shape expanded, gripped him, and hauled him towards the ground, laying him on his stomach.

Harry knelt over him and blinked. For the first and only time, he cried phoenix tears. It was like crying hot flowers. They welled past his lids and fell onto the immense wound in Rosier's back, and it turned gold instead of red, little by little. The gold hardened into a scab so beautiful that Harry had to resist the urge to touch it. Then Rosier moved, and it peeled and tumbled away from him, leaving unmarred skin in its place.

Rosier rolled over and stared up at him. Harry stared back. He could not make out anything in those dark eyes. He found that he didn't want to.

"Sometimes," Rosier breathed, "I hate you, Harry."

He stood up, and clutched something in his pocket Harry thought must have been his wand—it would have amused Voldemort to leave it with him while he hung helpless from the thorns, unable to access it—and then Apparated. Harry knelt in the grass, and blinked.

A cold feeling infested his eyelid. He rubbed at it, wondering what it could be. Normal tears? Draco's arms were around him now, light and hesitant, as if afraid to touch. Harry leaned back into him.

Another cold kiss brushed his cheek. Harry blinked, and looked up, and realized then what it was.

Snow.

Snow snow snow, tumbling from the sky as if the stars were shedding it between the tattered shreds of clouds, shaking out like salt from a cellar, coming to coat Britain, as the natural balance of the seasons was restored and winter came at last.

Intermission: Ten Leagues Beyond the Wide World's End

Snape did not know what he felt as he stood in the graveyard outside Little Hangleton, beneath the falling snow, and watched Harry lean back into Draco's arms and Evan Rosier Apparate away. He did not know what he felt even when the thorns trembled and then coiled around the graves like snakes all binding up into a nest against the winter cold. He did not know what he felt when the wind stirred and sent flakes of snow skittering up into his face, proving beyond doubt that it was real and not just another manifestation of the Dark, or wind and rain frozen into pellets.

He felt—empty, he thought, fitting the words carefully around the thoughts. Yes, that was the best description. He had surged with so many emotions, awe and terror and horror and rage, as he watched the flashes of lightning tilt through the clouds and occasionally caught a glimpse of beautiful, impossible things, that it was as if he were bled dry. He reached out a hand, and it trembled as it brushed Harry's shoulder above Draco's arm. Then it steadied.

Harry turned and looked at him.

And then Snape felt a surge of fear again, because that was the first time he really understood how close they had come to losing Harry.

Harry's eyes were blasted, like forests scarred by fire, like green lands newly turned into deserts, like villages fallen into pestilence from a nundu's breath. He was empty, too, numb and in shock. It made a jarring contrast to the fire that still fluttered beneath his skin like a little live thing, beating wings like the phoenix Snape was slowly accepting would never come fluttering out of the clouds again.

They had nearly lost him to greatness, to Dark winds and Light dawns, to sights that Snape couldn't imagine and didn't want to. He had known, on some abstract level, all his life, that Lords and Ladies wizards faced and saw things that other wizards and witches didn't. He had sometimes caught a glimpse of that in Dumbledore's eyes, but Dumbledore had compensated with his slightly mad persona, and Voldemort had, of course, paid the price with his sanity. Snape had never really known either of them as mortal, had never seen the cost

of their magic burning away what had made them, once, human and like others.

A large swathe of what Harry had been was gone now.

And Snape knew exactly what he felt—the desire to heal what he could, and to preserve what was left.

He gathered Harry roughly into his arms, drawing him away even from Draco. Draco tried to say something, but Snape shut him down with a glare that would have made Neville Longbottom faint dead away. He held Harry close to him. Harry leaned in a little, but made no attempt to embrace him back, and that chilled Snape's mind with worse fear.

"We are leaving," he said, not caring who heard him, not caring who followed, and he left the graveyard with his arms closed around Harry like steel bands. His goal was to reach the Apparition point and then return to Hogwarts, where Harry might learn something of what it was to be human again.

Harry, of course, being Harry, stirred as they passed the graveyard wall, and whispered, "But the Muggles—the ones the storm snatched—"

Snape paused with a frown and looked towards Little Hangleton. The houses stood there exactly as they had done, the lights showing through their windows. Snape shook his head. "The storm didn't disturb the Muggles, Harry. What is wrong?"

Harry struggled upright enough to look on his own, then shrank back within Snape's hold as if the sight of the houses standing untroubled had upset him more than what he'd faced in the clouds. "Perhaps the Light put them back," he whispered. "But I saw the Dark kill two Muggles, and the dragon who came to help me. And Fawkes gave up his life for me. I don't think any of them are alive again."

"No," said Snape quietly, thinking of the great shape he had seen come hurtling out of the sky to land with a thump that jarred the hills miles away. "We'll alert the Ministry, Harry, and let them investigate. I

think you're right, and the Light made it as if it were a bad dream for the Muggles, but it couldn't have brought the dead back to life. No magic can do that."

"I should go look—"

"No," said Snape. That was the voice he'd once used to silence Rosier, and Harry fell quiet, too, before it. "Not you. Not tonight. The Ministry can do it, Harry. I'll send an owl to Scrimgeour the moment I see you safely settled."

He kept walking, ignoring all the silent offers to take Harry from him, ignoring Draco trotting beside him, looking anxiously upwards. He should have grown tired long before they reached the Apparition point, but he did not. He kept on walking, and around him the snow shone as if every flake were a window with a candle beyond it.

And then they came out on the Hogsmeade road, and the true Hogwarts was before them, with its hundred lighted windows with candles behind them, and it was a welcome sight indeed. Lucius thought he had had the best view of all of them.

He had cast a spell to make his eyesight clear the moment Harry had risen into the clouds. He knew there was very little—likely nothing—he could do to interfere, but if a chance for his help did come, he wanted to be ready.

No chance had come. He had seen the Dark snatch Harry from the back of the dragon and rise, and then he had seen little more until the dawn had arrived in the middle of the storm. Those moments had been spent in grim silence, cold white silence polluted, just a little, by his shadow of curiosity over the way Draco had charged forward. He would be talking with his son later, learning what the reason behind his strange behavior might be.

He had seen the gryphon of Light appear, and take over Harry, and he had felt a mingling of both apprehension that the Light would take their ally away completely and the worshipful hatred he felt before a

respectable enemy much more powerful than he was.

The gryphon had fought, Harry had fought, and the clouds had slid past them and around the dancing Dark beast. Lucius thought it looked like a chimera, neither one thing nor the other, an ugly, lumpish beast that every sane creature in the world disdained. They danced on a dark stage, with a golden backdrop splattered with black clouds that shone as flat as the most inexpensive scenery, and above them the stage closed into a funnel that Lucius's eyes, even helped by magic, could not penetrate.

He had not known what gave the light to Harry until he returned to the ground and pulsed gently, with a phoenix's heart, in the snow, and then he had been, for one of the few times that he could ever remember—the last had been when he heard that a one-year-old baby had defeated the Dark Lord—at a loss for words. Phoenixes did not die. They rarely bonded with wizards, and when they did, it was a condescension and an honor. Lucius was willing to admit that, even though phoenixes were creatures of Light and he was a creature of Dark. The idea of a phoenix loving a wizard enough to die permanently for him was foreign, utterly outside Lucius's element.

And he might even have been able to assimilate that, if not for the light beneath Harry's skin. Fawkes had apparently given part of himself to Harry, passed into his body. That was stunning. That was too sharp to grasp. That was new.

For the first time, Lucius had the feeling that he wasn't participating in just another political struggle, but that he had come close to something higher and mightier than his world.

It made him—quiet for a while.
Hawthorn had smelled the battle.

The air had been sharp with the smell of a storm when they appeared in the Apparition point near Little Hangleton, and the only thing that had displaced it until the arrival of the Dark Lord himself was the shuck they had passed on the way in. The reek there made Hawthorn growl and want to raise her hackles, even though she didn't have

hackles as a human. It smelled like camel dung in the desert sun. Hawthorn had never smelled camel dung in any kind of weather; that knowledge came from the wolf inside her. The chant of blood and hatred and killing in the back of her mind had gone silent, and the wolf had sniffed warily, knowing it was in the presence of evil and not just darkness, before it dived into a corner of her soul and refused to come out.

But Hawthorn could still smell with its nose—they were too thoroughly united now for it to be otherwise—and she had smelled the storm brewing, and then foul flesh as the Dark Lord appeared. Apparently, the wards he'd cast on the graveyard were not enough to keep out odors. Of course, Hawthorn was rapidly finding that non-werewolves didn't care that much about smells. She did, and she had to pinch her nostrils shut to keep her mind concentrated on rescuing Harry. The smell of the worm and the vines would drive her mad otherwise.

The wards had broken, and the Light had come with a scent like bluebells, so thick and overwhelming that the wolf had risen out of the back of her mind to complain about not smelling anything else. For a moment, as she watched the white flood slam into Harry and fill him with power, Hawthorn had felt ridiculously cheerful, even though she didn't serve Light.

The storm had arrived, and put an end to that, and an end to the bluebells. There was only sharp tin, then, the fragrance of brewing rain. Hawthorn had watched as Harry rose with his phoenix and his dragon, and she did not expect him to return again. Whatever her human heart might say, her nose announced that the Dark was just too strong.

And then...

And then...

And then she might have pinched her nostrils shut again, except that the scents lapped her like magic itself, and she didn't have that much presence of mind.

She breathed terror, hope, despair, clarity, things she had never known had a smell until just then. She smelled justice, and it was like white fire, but not very like it; that was simply the best analogy her thoughts could come up with. She smelled the moment when the phoenix sang and died, and she saw the golden flowers like drifts of sweetness around her knees, and she trembled and wanted to do nothing but bathe in unicorn spoor until the end of her days, and she compared the winged horse of the stars to snow and lost her heart in longing to see one. She smelled the moment when the light passed into Harry, and saw him come nearer and nearer, like a tumbling comet that would grace and not hurt the earth when it landed, but she could have closed her eyes and seen him just as well; his scent was that sharp.

She sniffed as he landed, and found that his scent had changed. It had a garnish of fire that had never been there before.

She needed no one to tell her that a phoenix had died and yielded part of his light to Harry. It was there for anyone who wished to smell it.

Ignifer saw little of their journey back to the Apparition point, because she was lost in the memory of an old tale that her father had told her.

That had been in the days before she knew she would ever Declare for Dark, when her father could set her on his shoulders and wander in the Apollonis autumn garden and she had not the least shadow of a suspicion that it would ever be different. He'd walked under the red trees with her one day, when she was nine years old, and told her one of the history chants that made up their family's most precious legacy. Other families sang history songs. The Apollonis family chanted, in Latin, the language Ignifer had learned at her mother's knee.

Calypso McGonagall, he'd told her, had been the last Light Lady truly worthy of the name. She had defeated the Dark, in the form of the Eagle Lord, when she had to, but then she had lived in peace, and used her power in the service of those who came to her requesting help. Nothing had changed in years on years except to grow better,

as the British Isles flourished in the reign of the Light and all the snakes lost their fangs.

All had gone on this way until Lady McGonagall was one hundred and fifty years old. At that time, there had been one of their ancestors working in her home, a young woman by the name of Praeferox Apollonis. She had been a gardener, and she had taken well to the humble work, since she was a naturally humble person. But she was very curious, and she would follow any sound or investigate any strange happening if she was done with her duties for the day.

She had heard a strange sound one day just as she finished planting a new stand of phoenix flowers, and she had followed it down the garden's winding paths, until she reached the decorated window of her employer's house that looked out on the gardens, a place where she almost never dared venture. Praeferox turned and would have gone away again, but the sound repeated itself. It was a clear song, one perfect note held and sustained. Curiosity made Praeferox step up to Calypso McGonagall's window and press her face against the silver of it, spun to a lightness clearer than glass.

She saw a golden stone on the floor, alight with a shimmering, vibrating flame. It sounded the note one more time as she watched, and then collapsed into stillness. It had words written on it. Praeferox hesitated a long time, thinking of Lady McGonagall's unpredictable experiments, but at last she opened the window and climbed through it, so that she could read the fire-bright letters incised into the rock.

Do not mourn for me, they said. I have gone where you cannot follow.

The letters faded as she watched, and Praeferox blinked as one of the servants burst into the room, saying anxiously that they couldn't find the Lady anywhere, had she seen her?

They searched everywhere, but they never did find Calypso McGonagall. They theorized at last that she must have Transfigured herself into the golden stone, and been unable to undo it. They tried, they brought in experts to try, and they performed rituals on the rock, but of course no other wizard or witch was nearly as powerful as the Lady of Light, and none of them could unwind her invocation.

Praeferox told no one of the letters she had seen, for she was only the gardener, and no one would believe her. But she preserved the story, and passed it on to her daughter and her sons, and since then the Apollonis line had clung to it. It was Praeferox's theory that Calypso McGonagall had indeed gone where no one could follow, assumed herself into the Light as she had sometimes spoken of doing, walked the strange roads that wizards and witches of lesser power could not comprehend, much less see or walk.

Ignifer remembered her younger self going silent in awe, and her father stroking her hair, walking with her along the scalloped paths, the red and golden leaves tumbling down onto their shoulders.

Ignifer was sure the same thing had nearly happened to Harry tonight. It would explain the shattered look in his eyes, the way he kept his face buried in his guardian's shoulder other than that one glance at the Muggle village, the flicker and blaze of radiance beneath his skin.

She did not know if he would have gone to Light or Dark, and she knew it was none of her business. She only felt honored to have witnessed something so near to a fading, and if her father ever lifted the sterility curse on her and she had children of her own, she would tell them the story, as Praeferox had told her children hers.
"Harry?"

Draco wouldn't have voiced the question if he hadn't been startled. He'd noticed that Harry turned his head when someone spoke to him since they'd arrived back at Hogwarts, but did nothing else. And the sight of those shattered eyes, so terribly attentive, made Draco prefer to just hold him and lean his forehead on Harry's shoulder and not meet his gaze.

Yes, that wasn't terribly brave. But bravery was for Gryffindors.

He'd fallen asleep in one of the hospital beds, with Harry in his arms; Madam Pomfrey knew better than to scold them for that, after one look at Harry. He hadn't even felt Harry wake and slip free of him,

walking towards one of the open windows in the hospital wing. Then he'd opened his eyes, and seen the small figure standing in front of the windowsill, and spoken without thinking.

But Harry didn't turn towards him. He continued staring out the window. Draco wondered what he was seeing. It couldn't be anything very clear. Even though the clouds had parted, the stars were the only light available tonight, and Harry had left his glasses on the bedside table, beside the faint glow of his own wand, which Draco had retrieved from the graveyard as they left. He hadn't wanted to leave Harry entirely alone in the dark.

Draco wondered what he saw, but not for very long, because then he heard Harry singing.

The song was soft at first, a trembling whisper that probably wouldn't have awakened Draco if he'd managed to stay asleep. Then it built, and acquired the sound of a sob. Draco stirred, thinking he should move from the bed and go to cradle Harry, but his arms wouldn't move more than one inch. They froze as Harry's voice climbed higher and higher, swirling around the towers and walls of Hogwarts like spreading wings, as if he were embracing it from above.

Draco lay there and listened to phoenix song blended with a human voice, and thought he might die of it. The purity of the grief in it touched him to the quick. A wizard would have been choked with tears, a phoenix would have mourned in such a high and unearthly fashion that Draco might have escaped tears of his own, but this dirge was both, humanity mingled with clarity, and it hurt.

The song flurried, beating back at the darkness with small sharp flashes of light; Harry had a fire burning in his palm, casting his face into edged shadows. Draco watched the shadows dancing around him, and saw them grow human forms, robes and arms, swaying and bowing. What they bowed to wasn't visible.

Harry's voice soared, and Draco heard other people crying, or calling out in confused tones, but they fell silent as the song continued. It didn't have words. It didn't need them. It fed the proper visions into students' minds, showing them, the way Harry had said Fawkes

showed him, scenes from a life of mountains and meadows and moons. It showed them immortality cut short, and Draco didn't feel ashamed of the tears that soaked his cheeks; he knew that his parents, sleeping elsewhere in the castle, would be crying the same way.

Harry's song turned one more time, and then came diving down, becoming softer, pursuing the path it had climbed. Draco heard no more than a golden corkscrew, at last, and then that faded and went out at the same moment as the fire in Harry's palm did.

He waited a moment more, and found he could move. He climbed slowly out of bed and went over to Harry, tucking his arms around his waist and his chin onto his shoulder.

"Is that the gift Fawkes gave you?" he whispered. "His voice?"

Harry glanced up at him. The green eyes weren't human, for a long moment, reflecting shining, shifting shadows from a moon that wasn't there. Draco saw him somewhere in darkness, in light, lost ten leagues beyond the wide world's end, and shivered. The wild Dark, he thought, had been the greatest threat to Harry tonight, but not in the way they all believed. What if it had tempted Harry to come with it?

Then Harry trembled, and he was human again.

"Yes," he whispered. "His voice, and some of his fire, and—maybe other things that I don't know about yet." He shook his head. "I can't tell you what it was like, Draco, up there, seeing the way the Dark and Light saw, for just a moment, knowing—"

"You don't have to," Draco said, ducking his head and whispering into Harry's hair. "I don't want to know. Honest, Harry, I don't."

After a moment, he felt Harry nod against his neck. "All right, then," he said. "I know it's not over. I know I'm going to have to learn better, so that none of my enemies can ever force me to make a sacrifice like that again." His voice was horribly weary, and made Draco want to cry once more. "But for tonight, I just want to sleep."

Draco nodded, and cast a powerful Dark Arts locking charm on the doors of the hospital wing, though in truth he didn't think they needed it. The students and the professors and their guests for the night might wonder, but they wouldn't intrude on someone who sang like that. He climbed back into the hospital bed, and held out his arms, and Harry climbed into them and leaned against his chest.

Long after his breathing had evened out, Draco remained awake, watching the dancing shadows on the wall from the fire glowing beneath Harry's skin.

Chapter Fifty-Six: Rejoicing

Harry woke with a start. For a moment, he thought he was back in the hospital wing, and that it was the morning after the battle with the Dark, and he flinched, because people had come to see him that morning before he was ready.

Then he remembered that two days had passed. He let his head fall back and breathed deeply. When he closed his eyes, no frightening visions danced on the inside of his eyelids, but only memories of what had really happened.

He'd been excused from classes on Friday, of course; no one was going to force him to go. He'd wandered around the school in strange, fragmentary circles after that morning adventure in the hospital wing—which had resulted in Slytherin losing ninety points because Draco couldn't stop hexing people—and talked to whom he found. There had been a surreal conversation with Acies in a room near the North Tower where she asked him if he believed that things which were lost might come back again. He'd spoken to Vera in a rush of words he could no longer really remember, and didn't want to, since they made him blush in embarrassment. He'd met Remus on the grounds, and they walked in silence, so deep and profound that Harry could have believed he was alone with the snow-covered Forbidden Forest. He'd seen Cho Chang watching him solemnly from a distance; she'd inclined her head and then left him to stand on the shore of the lake, obviously sensing without words that he didn't want to talk just then.

He'd ended up down in the dungeons. He no longer remembered if he'd been trying to find the common room. Perhaps he intended to stand outside the door and listen, since he didn't think he could face large groups of people just then.

But he'd wound up outside Snape's private rooms. Snape had taken one look at him, and opened the door, and let him in. Harry had fallen asleep on the couch and not stirred for hours, which was unusual. He more often woke up at least a few times in a night.

Then, today, Saturday, he'd helped Snape brew potions, speaking and being spoken to only about instructions or what ingredients to substitute when he found out that Snape didn't have any more dried Still-Beetle shells. It had made Harry feel like a pool of deep water slowly closing around a dropped stone. They'd brewed until noon, and then he'd gone to sleep on the couch again.

Judging from the candles around the room and the pit in his stomach, he'd slept until evening, and he was hungry for the first time in two days. He sat up and reached for his glasses, which Snape had taken and put on the table next to the couch.

"Harry?"

He glanced warily to the side, blinking as the world came back into focus. Snape sat in his chair, sipping from a cup of tea and holding open a place in his book. He looked mildly curious, which made the tray in front of him, holding bread thick with butter, pumpkin pasties, some kind of light and fluffy fish, and a cheese sandwich, seem almost a coincidence.

Except not quite, Harry thought, and smiled at him. "I'll be better," he said, and then used a Levitation Charm to move the tray over to him. "I assume you've had dinner already?" He glanced at Snape, who inclined his head.

"Eat your fill."

Harry was more than happy to. The bread and the fish never seemed to end—just when he thought he'd eaten everything, there was one more crumb—but they broke apart so gently that he never felt overwhelmed by the amount. The cheese was of a kind that he couldn't remember having before, so sharp it seemed to score patterns on the roof of his mouth. He ate three of the pumpkin pasties without stopping, aware of Snape's gaze on him, now amused, now evaluative, but demanding nothing.

He was drinking the last of the glass of milk that had come along with the tray when he realized that the pasties were in the shape of

Christmas trees. He blinked and glanced up. "It's two days until Christmas," he said.

Snape arched his eyebrows. "One, actually. Today is the twenty-third."

Harry felt the first bubble of worry break through the calm surface of his being. "I don't have gifts for anyone," he said, so quietly that he almost thought Snape wouldn't hear him. But if Snape didn't hear something that passed in his private quarters, Harry had not yet found out what it was.

"I would not worry about that, Harry," he said dryly. "I think saving Britain from the wild Dark is enough of a gift."

Harry shook his head. "That's not what I meant. I don't think myself bound to get gifts for everyone. But I'd like to have them for you, and Draco, and Connor, and the Malfoys." He plucked at the side of the tray, nearly upsetting it.

"Finish your food," said Snape mildly. "Then you can worry about it. But it's not the kind of thing to contemplate on less than a full stomach." He went back to his book.

Harry stared at him for a while. Snape gave no sign that he noticed. Harry warily returned to eating from his tray, though he couldn't help sidelong glances. Why is he being so gentle? Does he really think that I took that many wounds in the clouds?

Well, maybe he had, Harry admitted grudgingly, as he licked pumpkin pasty crumbs from his fingers. The loss of Fawkes was still an ache that he didn't really want to touch; the numbness had worn off now, and it had begun to hurt properly. And he felt as if the Light, cautious though it had tried to be with him, had flayed his mind. He still shrugged his shoulder blades sometimes expecting the weight of wings, and moved his hand in patterns that would have seemed more natural to a gryphon's talon. Even those few moments in another body had molded him to it, rather than the other way around.

And the deaths...

Harry closed his eyes, and shivered, and sat still for a moment. That was the worst part of it. That was the weapon he had to allow never to be wielded against him again. For the sake of sparing lives, he had been willing to give up everything that he was. It had been an untenable choice, between life and freedom. He thought Fawkes had intervened not only to stop the wild Dark, but to prevent Harry from Declaring and the magical creatures from losing their vates. That meant he had to find some way to make sure that that sacrifice was not meaningless.

So what would he do, if it happened again?

Harry swallowed, and stirred pumpkin pasty crumbs around on the tray with a finger. The trouble was, he couldn't say his answer would be any different. If Voldemort lined his allies up in front of him and began killing them one by one, only stopping when he agreed to stay out of the War, wouldn't he have to do it? He owed his allies too much for it to be otherwise.

But it was wrong, too, to say that he would give up fighting for the sake of a few people, when Voldemort would go on to torture and enslave many more people than that. Wasn't it?

For the first time, Harry thought, he was really hanging between the horns of Dumbledore's dilemma, the awful choice he'd made so many times and which Lily had so admired him for. She'd whispered tales of those decisions to Harry as she put him to bed each night. Confront him with a few allies and the whole population of Britain, and Dumbledore would choose the whole population of Britain. He had done it so many times that Voldemort, disgusted, had at last given up using that tactic against him.

The problem was, Harry couldn't see that it was as simple as that. He could foresee having to make a different choice each time, because sometimes, the sacrifice really wouldn't be worth the cost.

So, he thought, as he realized that there were no more pumpkin pasties and there wouldn't be more just because he wanted there to be, the best thing would be to make sure that you can't be forced into

making that choice. It's not the decision you fear so much as being forced into making it. You might choose to save the people in front of you not because it's the right thing to do, but because you can't stand seeing them tortured, and others are far away. And that's wrong. Dumbledore could afford not to think about Peter because he was in Azkaban. But he was still doing the wrong thing.

Harry gave a sharp nod of his head. That would be it, then. Rather than try to make one decision now that would guide all his choices in the future, he would do his best to change the circumstances in the future, so that neither Voldemort nor anyone else could force him along a certain path.

"Harry?"

Harry blinked and glanced up. He'd been lost enough in his thoughts that Snape could have addressed him once or twice, and he wouldn't have noticed. His guardian's face reflected no impatience, however. He merely nodded, as if it were good enough that Harry were looking at him now.

"Regulus has decided that he would like to have a small gathering on Christmas Day at Copley-by-the-Sea," he said. "He and Pettigrew will be there, of course, but otherwise only you, Draco, your brother, the elder Malfoys, and I are invited. Will that be acceptable?"

Harry sighed. "That will be more than acceptable," he replied. "I don't think I could join in the Christmas celebrations of the whole school right now."

"Assuredly not," said Snape. "You may stay here tomorrow, or, if you feel up to braving the Great Hall, you can do that." There was the faintest undertone of hope in his voice, like an aftertaste of sorrow. He hopes that I'll stay here, Harry thought.

And he did want to. For the moment, his anger at Snape, though not gone away, was at low tide. Harry had been at peace enough to fall asleep here, something that would happen nowhere else he could think of. Even the Slytherin common room, though people might shut their mouths with Draco around to hex them, would be full of

questioning eyes and questions in minds. Harry needed the sensation that no one cared if he talked, that he could do it or not do it, and either would be acceptable.

"I want to stay here," he said quietly.

Snape nodded. "Do you feel up to seeing Draco tomorrow?"

Harry blinked. "You kept him away today?"

"I did," said Snape. "Try as he might, Mr. Malfoy would interrupt your work. He is a brilliant hand at Potions, but he is at the point in his education when he wants to brew complicated ones only. I knew he would not settle for doing the patient, undemanding work you wanted to do today. Nor would he have left you to sleep for so long without trying to squirm onto the couch and sending you both to the floor."

Harry couldn't make out the emotions in Snape's voice—whether Snape was exasperated with Draco, or amused, or just stating that that was the way it was. He tried to reason them out for a moment, and then realized that he didn't need to, and didn't want to. He deserved a few days to relax and not tease out emotions and implications if he wanted. The thinking he'd done about his choices in the future was as much vates work as he wanted to do today.

"I feel up to seeing him tomorrow," he said. "But he's not to spy on me while I make his Christmas gift."

"There's a potion he won't figure out, and won't make the cauldron explode with," Snape replied in the same tone. "I'll set him to working with that."

"Why won't he figure it out?" Harry had to ask. Draco's talent with Potions was natural, rather than learned with long practice, as his had been. It seemed odd that there were any he wouldn't learn to brew with a few hours of trial and error.

"Because," said Snape, "the instructions in the book are wrong."

Harry snickered, and then paused. He was fairly sure that was the first time he'd laughed since he lost Fawkes. He blinked and lay back on the couch, a bit overwhelmed.

"Feel free to rest," said Snape.

As short a time as a month ago, Harry would have been certain that he should be up by now, that the rest he'd taken so far was more than he needed. But either the change in the Room of Requirement, or the losses he'd suffered since then, made him know, now, that he couldn't go out and be the cheerful savior that people would expect him to be yet.

"All right," he said, and closed his eyes. His breathing evened out. He had the easiest slide into darkness he'd ever experienced, and was vaguely surprised about it. He supposed the loss was still too near and too great to make a temporary escape from the world difficult for him.

When he was sure Harry was asleep, Snape put down his book and leaned forward, staring intently into his ward's face.

It did look better, he had to admit, even since this morning. Harry had brewed with single-minded concentration, as if the Boil Cure Potion they were making for Madam Pomfrey were in reality the elixir boiled from the Philosopher's Stone. His face had been tight and hard. Snape would have expected that look from another Potions Master, but no one else.

Then he'd slept, and twitched and muttered in dreams, and woken up looking like someone who'd been through torture, but more human. Snape was beginning to accept that Harry would come back to them, slowly—not exactly the same person he'd been before, but not as lost as he'd feared.

Slow and steady and gentle was the way to work. Merlin knew Harry was quick to pick up on the slightest hint of an expectation, and think he had to work to fulfill it. Give him nothing, let him do what he wanted, and he would relax.

A ward rang silently in Snape's head. He rose, laying down his book on his chair with a little more noise than he would have dared earlier. Harry slept on. Snape could feel himself trying to smile, but he squashed it as he went to his door. That ward had rung twice in the morning and three times in the afternoon. Harry had never noticed when he went to answer it, but then, Harry deserved the luxury of not noticing things right now.

He opened the door to find Draco staring anxiously up to him. "I want to see Harry," Draco said, hardly unexpected words. He'd started out with a tirade that morning, and Snape had shut the door in his face. Each attempt had gradually stripped the pomposity from him. Snape approved of the simplicity, if not the wish.

"You would wake him up," he said.

"I wouldn't," Draco said. "I only want to talk to him."

"Talking to him would involve waking him up." Snape stared directly into Draco's eyes, brushing his thoughts with a bit of Legilimency, and uncovered visions of chattering to Harry, who didn't have to respond, but whom he wanted to listen. Snape nodded. "Leave him alone for now, Mr. Malfoy. He has said that he will see you tomorrow. That is soon enough."

Draco sulked. Snape wondered where he'd picked that up from; Lucius would never have dreamed of doing it, and Narcissa got her way with other expressions. Of course, Lucius's father had never been as indulgent with him as Lucius and Narcissa were with Draco, and Narcissa had grown up knowing she had a mad sister, so perhaps it wasn't surprising that Draco would act more like a spoiled child.

"I just want to talk to him," Draco said, pulling Snape away from thoughts of the past. He found himself grateful to Draco for it. He rarely had luck with thoughts like that. He tended to brood on the cruelty of the Marauders, the reasons he'd joined the Death Eaters, the reason he'd left, and other things it was not good to think.

"I know you do," he said. "And tomorrow is soon enough."

Draco opened his mouth as if he would throw a tantrum, and Snape said, "If you speak much louder, you will certainly wake him up."

Draco shut his mouth, looking chagrined, and nodded. "Tomorrow, then," he said, between lips pursed so tightly that his voice was just a whisper.

Snape nodded back. "You might tell Potter about the Christmas gathering Regulus is planning," he added, as he moved to shut the door. "I am not yet certain he knows."

With Draco on his way to do something useful, and Harry soundly asleep, Snape felt prepared to take up his book again. He was reading about Potions Masters, for once, and the history of the art. Thoughts about his own past were not productive, but thoughts about the past might be. If nothing else, the book could give him ideas on what kind of defensive potions he might teach Harry to brew.

"So how do we get there?" Connor asked, bouncing up and down and rubbing his hands on his trousers.

Harry shifted the bag he carried, making sure the presents he'd prepared didn't click together. "Regulus sent us a Portkey," he said, and then glanced at Snape to make sure that was right. Snape nodded and held up a bit of what looked like tinsel, glancing around at all three boys to make sure they stood close enough to him to grab it.

"What did you get me for Christmas?" Connor asked, reaching out and grasping the tinsel. Harry felt a bit sorry for him. He hadn't seen Harry until this morning, and he seemed to be under the impression that bright chatter was the best way to get past the inevitable awkwardness of the aftermath of the Dark storm. Harry had tried to tell him it was all right, but Connor hadn't understood. Now, Harry decided to play along.

"I'm not telling you," he said, and chanted a non-verbal spell that gave Connor the sensation of being rapped on the wrist, a spell more often

used by mothers to stop children from reaching for biscuits. Connor pulled his hand back from the tinsel and gave him a wounded look.

“Please stop being utterly ridiculous, Mr. Potter, and grab the Portkey,” Snape said, with ice in his voice.

“But—“

“Now, Mr. Potter.”

Connor did so, sneaking Harry suspicious glances all the while. Draco took hold of the tinsel from the other side and was unexpectedly diplomatic, at least for Christmas morning, Harry thought. Of course, the other Christmases he’d spent with Draco tended to be atypical in some way. “It’s all right, Connor. He won’t tell me what he got me for Christmas, either.”

“It’s a secret,” said Harry, and then the Portkey grabbed them and whirled them all away, knocking Connor and Draco’s conversation into oblivion.

They landed in a large room Harry hadn’t seen before; the one other time he’d been in Copley-by-the-Sea, Regulus had been far more intent on showing him the hippocampi. It was aboveground, and had a window drilled through the stone, looking out over the sea far below. It must be right on the edge of the cliff, Harry thought, since they stood fairly far back from the window, and he could see the wrinkled gray waters of the ocean even from here.

“Welcome! Happy Christmas!”

Regulus’s hug bore Harry off his feet. He hugged back, and looked over Regulus’s shoulder to see the room decorated with so much tinsel that it entirely erased its cavernous qualities. Artificial Black spiders charmed to glow silver and gold and green and crimson marched up and down the walls between the garlands, now and then mingling with them as if the tinsel were burning. A tree stood in one corner, overflowing with gifts hanging from its branches, as if Regulus had been determined that none of the presents should touch the floor. Harry eyed it with resignation.

"Are you all right?" Regulus asked, setting Harry back on his feet and making him have to shift his grip on the bag of gifts.

"Better," said Harry. "Recovering." Regulus gave him a long glance, as if he really didn't believe him, which made Harry sigh. "I am," he said, catching and holding Regulus's eye. "I promise."

"You don't just recover from something like that," Regulus muttered at him. "But, if you say so." He brightened abruptly and turned to sweep Draco, who was looking smugly at Harry, off his feet. Draco's expression changed at once, but his struggles didn't do him much good as far as winning free went. "And welcome, little cousin!" Regulus exclaimed. "Happy Christmas to you, too!"

Draco looked extremely ruffled when Regulus put him down. Harry linked his left arm with his and pulled him towards the tree. Draco forgot his indignation in exclaiming over its size. "Do you think there are an equal number of gifts for each of us?" he asked, squinting at the upper branches. "I mean, there should be, but you never know if Regulus is going to be that fair. I think he likes you best," he added to Harry, managing to keep a straight face for approximately four seconds.

"Draco. Harry."

Harry turned sharply. He hadn't seen Lucius and Narcissa standing in the corner diagonally opposite from the tree, next to the room's entrance. It was Narcissa who spoke, coming forward to give her hands to her son. She kissed his forehead, then looked at Harry. Harry didn't think he was comfortable enough yet to step forward and let her hug him, though. He simply nodded to her.

Narcissa uttered a little sigh, then turned and faced Connor, who was just escaping his own welcoming embrace by Regulus. "I cannot believe Draco has been Harry's friend for four years, and yet I have never had a formal introduction to you, Connor," she said, stretching out her hand. "I should have arranged one after your parents' trial. It was remiss of me. I am Narcissa Malfoy."

Connor looked abashed as he clasped her hand and kissed the back of it. Harry could see why. Narcissa wore a pale blue gown that floated around her like spiderwebs and made her look more fairy-like than human. Connor mumbled his way through an introduction that seemed to satisfy her. Narcissa smiled at him, and then turned and took Lucius's arm, guiding him over to a divan beside the tree. Harry wasn't surprised to see Lucius watching his brother like a cat.

"Where's Peter?" he asked, since another glance didn't reveal Peter lurking in any of the corners.

"On his way up," said Regulus. "He made a present that was too big to wrap, so he had to leave it downstairs until we were all ready to gather here." He stepped toward the entrance and listened anxiously for a moment, then relaxed. "He's on the way up with it," he announced. "Of course, he's worried about his wandwork, and I don't blame him, so he's carrying it in his arms instead of using a Levitation Charm."

"Shut it, Black," Peter's voice said from below. "I wanted to carry it. I wasn't afraid it would bang into corners if I used a Levitation Charm." He came into view, going backwards and dragging the gift with him so that Harry couldn't see what it was at first. When he finally turned around and shoved it forward, Harry knew it was for him.

It was a carving, made out of some wood—oak, perhaps—that glowed as if it were still part of the tree. Bodies of various magical creatures coiled and writhed as if from the center of a fountain: dragons lying piled on each other, house elves peering warily from corners, great cats prowling with their mouths open in snarls, unicorns balancing Runespoors on the tips of their horns. Harry let his eyes wander over it for a longer period of time than was strictly polite, and still it seemed that there was no end to it. He could look at it for hours and never see all its secrets.

"It's beautiful, Peter," he whispered. "I never knew you carved wood."

"It was an old hobby of mine," said Peter, his voice lacking the pain when he spoke of the past that it'd had in Harry's third year. Harry glanced up to see Peter smiling at him over the dip in a unicorn's

shoulder. "I took it up again when I went to the Sanctuary. And since Regulus had plenty of wood lying around, and I have nothing else to do yet..." He shrugged. "I made this. Merry Christmas, Harry."

Harry nodded to him and floated the carving gently over to the side of the chair he already planned on taking. Then his plan was spoiled, because Draco insisted on sitting on a couch together, and Harry had to move the carving again. Peter was already passing out small packages that Harry knew must contain carvings to the others. He heard Connor laughing, and saw him holding up what looked like a lion in the middle of a somersault, chasing its tail. Draco got a complicated sculpture that meshed the old Black and Malfoy crests, with a dragon curled on top of it, fast asleep and scowling. Draco scowled, too, until Harry nudged him, when he roused himself and thanked Peter in a somewhat stiff voice.

Harry already knew that Snape had got everyone books of one kind or another, plucked from his own library; he'd tried not to peek, but working on his own gifts in close quarters with Snape made it hard. He smiled at Snape over his own book on the history of medical magic, and then angled himself to one side. He already knew which Potions book Draco would have.

Draco unwrapped it eagerly, then frowned at the slip of parchment fastened with a Sticking Charm to the front of the book: Look at page 65. Slowly, Draco opened the book, and studied the recipe. A moment later, he was looking up in outrage. Harry knew page 65 contained the proper instructions for the potion Draco had tried and spectacularly failed to brew yesterday.

"Professor Snape," Draco said.

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy?" Snape, who had taken the chair Harry had originally intended to sit on, scowled at him.

Draco took a deep breath, then obviously realized that, to scold Snape for what he'd done, he would have to reveal his own mistake to his parents, his cousin, his cousin's friend, and Harry's brother. He sat back with a little mutter instead, which Harry translated as, "Thank you for the book."

Harry took pity on Draco—and distracted himself from his own snickering—by fetching Draco’s gift from his bag. He’d chosen a box that Snape had said once contained Still-Beetle shells to wrap it in. Draco gave him a wary look and opened it slowly.

A moment later, he gasped and held up the bracelet inside. “Harry, it’s beautiful,” he murmured. “What is it?”

“I don’t know for certain,” Harry admitted. He’d concentrated on what he wanted and spun magic out of himself, an effort that left him exhausted for an hour afterwards. What had resulted was a band of, seemingly, metal that looped back on itself like a unicorn’s horn, and was not so much golden as the color of candlelight. “Call it magic.”

Draco slipped the bracelet around his wrist, and looked startled when it shook and tightened itself to a perfect fit. “What does it do?” he breathed.

“Who said it did anything?” Harry leaned back, grinning, the first genuine smile he’d been able to give since Fawkes.

“Harry.”

Harry relented. “All right. If you touch it with your left hand and speak my name—and you have to be touching it, mind, or it would be working every time you spoke to me—then it’ll tell you my current state of health, if I’m wounded or sick or whole.” Draco’s eyes widened as if they were going to fall out of his head. “If you curve back your right hand and touch it, and wish greatly for it, you’ll get pulled to my side, wherever I am. It’s like a Portkey focused on me. Powerful wards will be able to keep you out, but not much else.”

Draco shook his head in wonder. “I— isn’t that a bit intrusive, Harry?”

“Not if I want it,” said Harry, and locked his eyes on Draco. “And I want you to be able to do this. I do.”

Draco leaned forward, staring into his eyes. Harry flushed, wondering if Draco was about to kiss him here, but Draco only stared as if he

were memorizing every inch of Harry's face, and then nodded. He didn't need to say thank you. It was written in every line of his cheeks and jaw.

Harry turned quietly away to present the rest of his gifts: a cauldron enchanted with automatic self-cleaning charms and spells to prevent ingredients from sticking to the sides for Connor; a stirring rod bent into abstract shapes and figure-eight designs for Peter; a box filled with trick sweets for Regulus, which he'd arranged with the Weasley twins by owl to send him; and another stirring rod bent into a case to hold his wand for Lucius. Lucius eyed him for a moment, then bowed. Harry nodded back and looked away. He wasn't in the mood to try to figure out Lucius's games right now, and if his entirely blank face was a good thing or not.

His gifts for Narcissa and Snape were more personal, and Narcissa's was formed of pure magic the way Draco's bracelet had been. Her face softened as she held up a mirror that showed shifting visions of light—moonlight, starlight, sunlight—like the mirror she had given Harry last year that showed different visions of fire. "Thank you, Harry," she said quietly. "I have always delighted in watching changing patterns."

Harry smiled back at her, but looked away when the smile threatened to become too inquisitive, towards Snape.

Snape was unfolding a small scroll of parchment with a puzzled expression. Harry stifled a laugh; Snape had actually seen him working on that yesterday, but assumed it was an essay for Defense Against the Dark Arts, because Harry had told him it was. He really should have noticed my hand shaking when I wrote, Harry thought.

Then those thoughts melted away in nervousness as Snape actually began to read the damn thing. His face sharpened and grew paler. He looked at Harry once, then rose and strode out of the room.

Harry stood and went after him. Draco was the only one close enough to try to stop him, and whether because he had seen Snape's expression, or because he was occupied in exclaiming over his

mother's present for him, a coin that was one of the Black treasures, he didn't hold Harry back.

"Sir?" Harry asked as he moved through the door, unwilling to startle Snape, just in case he was too deep in thought to notice him coming.

Snape turned and stared at him. His face was still pale, but Harry thought he understood why the man had left the other room now. He was afraid that he would express too much emotion in front of Regulus or Peter—probably Peter, Harry thought, and the Malfoys. He thought Snape considered Regulus a close enough friend that he wouldn't mind him witnessing this.

Then Snape said, "You—you mean this," and Harry realized that he was shaking.

Perhaps he wouldn't want Regulus to see this, after all. Harry moved forward and stood staring at his guardian. "Yes," he said. "I did."

"You didn't need to," said Snape quietly. "There was no need to force yourself into discomfort just to make me a Christmas gift, Harry."

"I wanted to," Harry repeated. "Just what I told Draco. It might have made me a little uncomfortable, but I wanted to."

Snape looked aside from him.

"I needed reminders that I was alive, after—after Midwinter," said Harry. "And that I had commitments to people who were still here. I think I've done enough thinking about the past and the dead in these last two months."

Snape nodded shortly. The scroll dangled limply from his hand. Harry glanced at it once, then away. He knew what it said as well as Snape probably did. The words had burned into his memory as if they were etched with acid even as he wrote them.

I am trying my best to forgive you. It's hard, and it will take a longer time than this, but I do want to forgive you. I don't want anyone else for a guardian. I understand why you did what you did, so that I could

have a future. We'll probably always disagree as to the method, but I know now that something like this was necessary. Merry Christmas, sir. Love, Harry.

Harry hesitantly moved forward and embraced Snape. Snape didn't seem to notice for a moment, and then he hugged Harry back, with an abrupt, desperate fierceness. Even then, Harry noticed, he was careful not to let the scroll crumple between them.

"Merry Christmas, sir," Harry repeated aloud.

Snape said nothing. Harry didn't think he needed to. By the time they returned to the Slytherin common room—encouragingly empty, as almost all the students had gone home, and those who hadn't were currently attending the Christmas Feast in the Great Hall—Harry was almost in an agony of impatience. Draco had claimed that he'd forgotten his Christmas gift for Harry at Hogwarts. He'd also refused to even hint at what it was. Harry didn't believe for one second that he'd really forgotten it. More likely, he didn't want to give it to Harry in front of other people.

But now Snape had brought them back—with all the gifts that Regulus and everyone else had insisted on giving Harry safely shrunk and placed in his robe pockets—and Connor had pounded up to Gryffindor Tower to share his story with the four younger Weasley siblings, who'd all stayed at Hogwarts for Christmas. They were away from Lucius's gaze, which had frosted over several times during the day, always locked on Draco when it did. They were away from Narcissa's too-knowing smiles, and Regulus's supposedly sly sneaking out of the room, which always resulted in him coming back with one more "forgotten" gift for Harry. They were away from Peter's incredibly quick carving of a scowling Draco, which he'd made when Draco accused him of not being able to carve and actually stealing his gifts from somewhere.

Now Draco could show whatever it was that he'd been afraid to show when they were in public.

Draco had gone to his bed, and stood there fussing with the sheets, his back to Harry. Harry studied him for a moment, then went to his trunk and began putting his shrunken gifts away with more than usual fanfare. That should tell Draco he was willing to wait.

He was trying to figure out the proper place for the dagger Narcissa had given him when Draco tapped his shoulder. Harry turned and looked up at him, to find Draco actually biting his lip. It wasn't something he did often, probably because he had the twin disapproving gazes of his parents fastened on him for far smaller offenses.

"Here," he said awkwardly, and pushed a silver frame at him. Harry dropped the dagger on top of the rest of the items in the trunk and caught the frame with his hand, cradling it before it could fall.

The frame was tastefully plain, except for the Malfoy crest discreetly tucked in one corner. Harry skimmed his fingers along it, not yet looking at the center. The frame held a piece of parchment scribed with words, and he could tell that looking at them would make things close. "Someone planned for Christmas," he said lightly. The frame must have come by owl.

"Some of us didn't have to worry about the fate of the world for the last month," said Draco softly, lightly and yet not lightly at all.

He isn't going to let me joke about this, Harry realized. He swallowed, and sat on his bed, aware of Draco's gaze as he hadn't been aware of any of the looks they got at Copley-by-the-Sea. He started reading the words written on the piece of parchment inside the frame.

I love you, Harry, because you have the deepest soul I've ever known.

I love you, Harry, because you make me want to be closer to you in every way possible.

I love you, Harry, because of the fact that you survive everything the Light and the Dark and Voldemort and Dumbledore throw at you, and you don't just survive after it, you live.

I love you, Harry, because you were able to overcome prejudices you were raised with to consider me a friend and then as a lover, and yourself a Slytherin when you resisted it at first.

I love you, Harry, because of the fact that you honestly can't see why people wouldn't care about the fates of unicorns and centaurs and Runespoors and Augurey chicks.

I love you, Harry, because of the fact that you argue with your snake at the breakfast table about whether he can have more sausages.

I love you, Harry, because you're fierce.

I love you, Harry, because of the fact that you could so easily leave me behind, and the way that you try not to.

I love you, Harry, because you value healing and forgiveness more than killing and revenge.

I love you, Harry, because of the way you kiss.

I love you, Harry, because I don't think I know the slightest shadow of the splendor we'll be in five or ten years' time.

I love you, Harry.

Harry looked up. He knew that he was crying, but his sight seemed utterly clear. Perhaps he was seeing Draco in between the tears. "How did you know how much I needed to hear this?" he whispered.

Draco blinked. "It's perfectly obvious that you don't really get it, Harry, and I really wanted to do it. I—"

Harry lunged at him—that was the only word he could use to describe it afterward—dropping the frame on the bed and wrapping his arms around him. Draco gave an undignified noise like whumph, but that only lasted until Harry lifted his head and kissed him.

This was deeper than the kiss they'd shared in the hallway after the trial. Harry poured gratitude into it, and gladness, and sorrow, and as

much as he could of the love that reading that list had made him feel. He'd always tried to use words and magic to express his feelings, but that didn't mean he couldn't use gestures, too.

Draco regained his balance with a jolt, and kissed him eagerly back. Harry sighed as pleasure struck him, but it wasn't cloudy this time; it was sharp and as brilliant as if he were flying straight into the sun. He pressed himself closer, and moved his hand, which was gripping Draco's back, up until he had hold of Draco's hair, and was tugging at it, not gently.

Draco fell. Luckily, he landed on his bed, and Harry was able to shift his face so that his glasses didn't dig into Draco's cheek and hurt him. Draco blinked a moment, then resumed the kiss. Harry rolled off to the side and stretched out, feeling like a cat must feel when it sunbathed.

Draco drew away at last, and stared at Harry. Harry lifted his head and looked straight back.

"Merlin, you look good," said Draco. "I've messed your hair all up—yes, you can tell—and your mouth looks like you've been chewing a peach without caring where the juice goes." He looked smugly pleased with himself.

"I can see why you didn't want to do this in front of your parents," Harry murmured. It was the only thing he could say. He shifted restlessly, wanting to kiss Draco again.

Draco's expression altered into one of horror. "Harry, I don't want my mother knowing we snog."

"I'm fairly sure she's guessed," Harry pointed out, and wriggled closer. He felt absurdly happy. He wanted to run around the room and shoot balloons out of his wand. He wanted to jump up and down in place until people came back from the Christmas Feast and wondered what all the banging was. He wanted to laugh until he was sick. He wanted to touch Draco.

That last want, at least, he could gratify, and he reached out and put his hand firmly on Draco's chest, feeling his heartbeat. Draco sucked in a breath, and it was Harry's turn to grin smugly.

He kissed Draco one more time, lightly, then lay down beside him and started telling Draco all the reasons he loved him, laughter and tears and survival and brattiness and all. Draco closed his eyes, hummed contentedly in the right places, and suggested new reasons, mostly involving the words "perfect" and "wonderful," whenever Harry paused to think about his wording.

Harry didn't know when he fell asleep. He only knew that, for the first time in four days, he was looking forward to waking up more than he was to spending time unconscious.

Chapter Fifty-Seven: Resolutions

“Harry? Harry, are you all right?”

I can already see, Harry thought, as he sat up in bed and wiped at his forehead, where his scar ached from a dream for the first time in a month, that that’s a question I’ll get asked a lot in the life we share together.

“I’m all right, Draco,” he said, blinking as Draco yanked the curtains of his bed back and the light of a Lumos charm burned into his unprepared eyes. “Come on, crawl in before we wake Blaise up.”

“Blaise is already up,” said a cranky voice from the other end of the room. Blaise had stayed over the Christmas holiday, since his mother thought the wards of Hogwarts would protect him better than the wards on her own home, Wyvern’s Nest, which had already been broken into once. “You might as well talk loudly about whatever melodramatic plan you have going this time. I’m going to go to the library and sweet-talk Madam Pince into letting me in.” He climbed out of bed and padded towards the loo.

“Madam Pince won’t be in the library!” Draco yelled after him. “It’s New Year’s Eve!” The door of the loo shut without Blaise giving a response. Draco shrugged and looked at Harry. “Do you think she’ll be in the library?” he asked, as he climbed into bed and pulled Harry’s curtains shut.

“Yes, she will.” Harry sat up. “Now, how did you know I was having a dream?”

“That connection we share from you letting me practice possession on you, I think,” Draco said, leaning forward. His face assumed a pensive expression. “I didn’t actually experience it, the way I did that time you leaped into V-Voldemort’s mind.” He gave Harry a stern look. Harry stuck his tongue out at him. Draco frowned and went on. “But I knew you were dreaming—and that’s a strange feeling to have in the middle of my own dreams, let me tell you. And then I woke up, and I could hear you making those little sounds you make when your scar hurts.”

Harry decided not to ask, just in case the answer embarrassed him further. "I did have a dream," he whispered. "But it wasn't like either the visions I have of Voldemort when I'm spying on him, or those misty dreams he sent me when he was trying to make me do something. This was more like I was sharing his head while he dreamed. And the image makes no sense. I mean, it doesn't seem like it's anything particularly powerful or threatening."

Draco nodded. "What was it, then?"

"Just a hallway," said Harry. "A hallway that ended in a dark door. I wanted to open the door, but when I touched it, nothing happened. I could feel frustration and rage, but I don't think they were mine. I think Voldemort dreams about opening that door, and knows he can't." He looped his arms around his knees. "Why would that image, of all of them, cross over the barrier between us?"

"Are you sure you didn't let the barrier down, Harry? Or have a hole tear in it somehow?"

Closing his eyes, Harry felt for the grass that barricaded the Occlumency link, and had to shake his head at last. "I can't feel any holes. Of course, if Voldemort opened a tunnel, would I know?"

"Go talk to Snape tomorrow," Draco urged him, one hand finding his elbow. "Or—well, in a few hours, really. He has to know about this."

Harry nodded. Then he yawned. "I am still tired," he said. "If I'm going to the Isle of Man to visit with the Opallines for their New Year's celebration, then I should probably rest some more."

"Of course," Draco agreed. Then his face changed. "What?"

Harry, about to lie down again, found himself yanked up to face a scowling Draco. "You never told me that," Draco insisted.

"I did, too," said Harry. "I must have. I wouldn't forget to mention it, and I've known for a month. You just weren't paying attention." He pulled away from Draco and burrowed under the sheets.

Draco spluttered above him for a moment, then said, "Yes, I was. I always pay attention to you. Nothing you say escapes me."

Harry snorted.

"It doesn't," Draco protested. "And anyway, that's not the point. The point is that you're not going to the Isle of Man, not by yourself. I'm sure that Snape is going to want to come along, and I certainly do!"

Damn. Trying to get him involved in a different argument didn't work. Harry pulled his sheets off his head and scowled at Draco. "Paton didn't invite you, though," he said, knowing he was being childish. It had taken more than a week, but he was finally feeling that shying sensation inside himself whenever Draco or Snape came near, that indication that he'd spent too much time with them now and they would start seeing too much. He knew he couldn't ask to be perfectly alone, but being among the Opallines would at least provide him with strangers for a night who didn't know him as well, and would miss any subtle signals he gave.

"I'm sure he would say it was all right," said Draco firmly. "He doesn't strike me as an impolite man, or an ally who would think it was proper for you to go anywhere without guards."

"Draaaco," said Harry, and now he knew he was being childish, and that meant he'd lost.

Draco patted his back. "Go to sleep. I think you need rest." He snickered. "Then talk to Snape in the morning, and talk to Paton with that communication spell. He'll make room for two more guests, and he'll do it a lot more graciously than you think he will. The Old Blood was famous for its courtesy, Harry, at least in days where there were more of those families."

Harry sighed and closed his eyes. Draco bent down and brushed a light kiss over his cheek, then went back to his own bed. Harry heard him shut his curtains, and his breathing resumed a soft, regular rhythm in moments. Draco could always fall asleep easily, unless he was worrying about something; Narcissa had confessed to Harry

already that Draco had slept through the night when he was three months old.

Only then did Harry stretch out and frown reluctantly at the ceiling of his four-poster.

He knew that he would have to find some way to sever the mental connection he and Draco had. For one thing, if Voldemort did launch an attack that could get through the grass barrier—and since he was the best Legilimens Harry had ever met, that was possible—then Draco could get caught up in it. Harry was sick of having other people suffer for his sake. That connection had to go.

For another, Harry knew he would have to reopen the Occlumency link. Without it, he was blind to what Voldemort was doing. He was sure that he would have been able to figure out part of the plans for the graveyard ambush if he'd been listening to Voldemort's thoughts. He was given to gloating. And Harry might have seen a demonstration of Yaxley's plans, too, and come up with some idea how to counter them.

How are you going to counter them?

Well, there were a few people he could speak to about that. In the meantime, he needed that dream connection. Even figuring out why Voldemort had the dream about the corridor might help him in the end. He'd keep their connection shut until he learned some way to separate Draco from it permanently, and then he'd part the grass and go in as quietly as he could, to see what could be seen.

"Neville? Can I talk to you?"

Neville turned around, a look of plain surprise on his face. Harry wondered if he was surprised at being talked to or surprised that Harry had wanted to talk to him. But, after a moment, he nodded. "Sure, Harry," he said, and then cast around vaguely until he apparently decided that sitting in the corridor was the best they could do. He sat down, and Harry sank down the wall to sit beside him.

Harry decided to come straight to the point. "Neville," he said, "I have an enemy who fights with plants—vines that can bind wandless magic, and grass that can twine around people and hold them prisoner, and thorns that were holding a man by being embedded in his skin, and slowly eating him alive." Neville's face had rearranged itself into an expression of fascinated horror. Harry nodded to him. "I know. Do you know what those things are? Do you know how to counter them?"

Neville frowned and rubbed his wrist. "They all sound bred, Harry," he said at last. "Crossed from other plants. I don't know anything like that that occurs in the wild."

Harry sighed. "That's what I thought. Would you be able to figure out counters to them?"

"M-me?" Neville dropped his Defense Against the Dark Arts book in surprise. "You want m-me to help you, Harry?"

"Of course. You're the best at Herbology in the whole school, except maybe Professor Sprout herself, and I don't know her that well." Harry leaned forward. "And Ron told me about you contributing your Light magic to the stream to help me, Neville. I'm not going to be fooled again, you know."

"Fooled?" Neville blinked at him.

"I'm never going to think that you're clumsy and bumbling and a coward again," said Harry softly. Neville blinked some more. "Too many people dismiss you as just that. But I know that you have courage, or you wouldn't have gone into Gryffindor. And now you've demonstrated courage. I'm afraid I'm going to insist on seeing you as brave now. Sorry, but the spell's broken."

Neville lowered his head, a flush of pleasure on his cheeks. "That's all right, Harry," he said. "And I think I might be able to help. Can you describe exactly what the vines and the grass and the thorns look like? If I can figure out what species they were bred from, then I can see about breeding crosses of those species' predators or competitors."

Harry had to admit that wouldn't have occurred to him. He began to describe the plants in as much detail as he could remember them, deliberately crowding back the emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. They could shove off. He didn't want to brood on them, so he wouldn't. And if what he had experienced could be useful to the war effort in any way, then he had no excuse for ignoring it.

Neville asked several questions that Harry didn't know the answers to, like what kind of soil the graveyard had, but overall seemed satisfied with what he told him. He smiled at Harry and then stood and wandered down the hallway, muttering about where he was going to find trumpet-heart seeds at this time of year.

Harry grinned, watching him, and then stood and went to cast the communication spell and speak with Hawthorn. Her estate was called the Garden, and she had created the hawthorn plant that he could use to call out to her. She had some skill with plants, though he didn't think it matched Yaxley's.

Harry waited in patient silence as Snape stepped delicately around inside his head, examining the grass barrier that shut off the Occlumency link from several angles. At last, his guardian's presence slipped out of his mind, and he opened his eyes to find Snape shaking his head.

"There appears to be no hole whatsoever," he said. "Describe the dream again."

Harry did, but it had been misty and fragmented even when he first dreamed it, not holding the unnatural clarity of one of the visions, and he couldn't add any useful details. No, he hadn't noticed any unusual patterns in the stone, but that didn't mean there hadn't been; he might just not have observed them. No, there didn't seem to be curses or wards on the door, but Voldemort hadn't cared about that. No, he still couldn't open the door, but how did Snape know that was the result of a curse or ward, and not something inherent in the place itself?

At last, Snape pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled in frustration. "I can only tell you to keep the barrier up, Harry, and detach the connection with Draco if you can. That is dangerous."

Harry nodded. "That's what I thought. I'll do what I can, sir, but Draco won't like it."

Snape snorted. "Mr. Malfoy does not like many things, and the majority of them are good for him." He paused and studied Harry critically. "Sometimes he is right, however. He came down here this morning to tell me that you had received a New Year's invitation you didn't see fit to warn us about. Why?"

Harry lowered his head, flushing uncomfortably. "I—sir, please don't take this the wrong way, but I'm starting to be too conscious of what you see when you look at me," he said quietly. "I've spent days in your company, longer than I usually go, and when I'm not with you, I'm with Draco. I want some time alone, or with people who don't know me as well."

Snape was silent for a long moment. "And have you told Draco this?" he asked finally.

Harry shook his head. "I tried to convince him at first that I'd told him about the invitation, and he just hadn't paid attention. He didn't buy that, of course. And now he's set on going with me, and I don't know what to do." He felt a rush of relief that he could talk with Snape about this, even as Snape studied him and his discomfort increased. He wondered if he'd ever be able to spend endless amounts of time in the presence of other people and never long for solitude. Connor seemed to manage it just fine.

"I will talk with him."

Harry could feel his mouth drop open. "You would?"

Snape nodded. "You must not ever be afraid to ask me for something like that, Harry," he said, catching Harry's eye. "I would brave far worse than a Malfoy temper tantrum for you."

His ears heating, Harry nodded. He knew that, he did, but he couldn't seem to hold it in his head all the time. He still preferred to do things by himself. Unless it was a problem he knew he absolutely couldn't handle, like Yaxley's plants, then seeking out help was always a distant, second option.

"Thank you, sir," he murmured.

"You are welcome." Snape stood and gently ushered him towards the door. "Now, you said that you had other things to do today?"

"Other things I should do today." Harry cast several warming charms on himself, and then touched his neck. Yes, the Many snake was there, curled closely into his warm skin. "It's New Year's Eve, the last day of the year, and that's a time for making vows."

"Make sure you can keep them," said Snape, his hand straying to his left arm for a moment.

Harry smiled at him. "I'll make sure I can."

The trees of the Forbidden Forest seemed to have seriously embraced the idea that it was winter, now. Harry saw some of them encased entirely in ice, their twigs puffing into fairy flowers of white and gold. Others rose bare and high against the diamond-bright, diamond-colored air, arms lifted as if to catch and hold the clouds. The ground beneath his feet squeaked as he stepped on frozen leaves and mud, and shattered in splashes as he broke small patches of ice.

He was aware of the centaurs tracking him the moment he entered the Forest, of course. No longer inclined to attack intruders the moment they saw them, they were still proud and wary. Hooves splashed and broke the ice in larger noises and patches than his feet could, and when Harry turned his head, he could sometimes see a black or palomino tail weaving in and out between the branches. Soon the centaurs showed themselves, trotting easily beside him: a bay Harry didn't know, and Firenze. He inclined his head to the latter, who nodded back.

"Have you come to visit us, Harry Potter?" he asked.

Harry didn't bother correcting Firenze on his last name. It wasn't something that would matter to the centaurs. "Yes," he said. "You, and the Many if they're awake at this season, and anyone else who will meet me. I want to renew my vows to them, to reassure them that I'm still vates and will be unless something kills me or I fall from the path."

"Even if you die, you are still vates," said Firenze. "We would hold the memory of you sacred." He nodded to the bay, who began to gallop ahead, his footing light on the treacherous ground and not all that cautious. Firenze went on, forcing Harry to turn and look at him instead of waiting for the other centaur to break his neck. "We have heard that you tried to convince the half-giant to travel and speak to his kin, and that you were unsuccessful."

Harry grimaced. "Yes." Hagrid had, after long thought, told Harry that he really couldn't do it. There had been tears in his eyes as he explained that he couldn't use his connection with his mother that way, to serve some political purpose. Harry had been disappointed, but had understood.

"I will offer to go," said Firenze.

Harry blinked. "I wasn't aware that centaurs and giants shared any kind of connection," he said.

"Not centaurs in general," said Firenze patiently. "My mentor went once to giant country, and preserved the maps, and showed me the way. He was more curious than the majority of us, more willing to venture into strange paths with only the stars to light him on his journey. I once meant to take the trip, but of course the web prevented me. The web told the wizards that he had left the Forest, and they caught him a few years later and killed him for being 'a danger to wizardkind.'"

Harry winced. "I'm sorry. You have little reason to love us."

“You are not most wizards,” said Firenze. “And the stars have told me it is time. The Lady is rising, and the Leaf is in bloom.” Harry tried to nod as if he understood what the centaur was talking about. Astronomy had always been one of his worse subjects, since he devoted so much of his time to understanding other things. “I will pursue this path. You have only to tell me what you offer the giants, and I will explain it to them. It will take a long time, but my mentor taught me some of their language.”

“The same thing I offer any species,” said Harry. “Freedom from their web, as soon as it can be negotiated.”

Firenze bowed solemnly from the waist. “It shall be done, vates.”

Harry looked away, uneasy with the courtesy—it would have been all right if it just weren’t a bow, implying that he was higher than others—and then realized they were coming up on the clearing where he had met with several species before. A small gathering of centaurs stood there now, shifting their haunches and shivering to keep warm, and a writhing tangle of the Many coiled on several of their backs, to keep their scales out of the snow.

What really caught Harry’s attention, though, was the creature standing on the other side of the clearing. He stopped and stared. He thought it was a dryad at first, though he hadn’t been aware that any of them lived in the Forbidden Forest. It was slender, pale green of skin like new leaves, and it had many arms, most of which started out as skin, corkscrewed into bark, and ended up in delicate bunches of twigs and brilliant leaves. Harry thought it had two legs, but he couldn’t be sure; perhaps those were more of its branches. It moved forward lightly enough, and then the branches swayed enough to let him see the face.

Harry stared again. The face was like the memory of his fragmented dream that morning; it had been real at some point long ago and far away. It slanted from right to left, a diagonal face, with ears so sharp they looked like knife-blades and enormous green eyes that dominated it. Harry looked hastily away from those eyes. He had seen sparks of silver begin in them, as if they were deep pools, and he knew instinctively that he could fall into them and never come out.

“Who are you?” he whispered. “The spirit of the Forest?”

A gentle voice, filled with the music of roots, answered him. “You knew me once, Harry vates.”

Harry turned back, careful to keep his gaze not directly on those green eyes. He had a suspicion now, but this was so—strange.

“Dobby?” he said at last.

The figure inclined itself, like a tree bowing before the wind, and said, “Yes. I have changed, Harry, have I not?” He—Harry supposed he was still a he, and not an it—stroked his skin with two twig-like fingers.

“The last time I saw you, you were an elf,” said Harry. “You looked more like one of the Sidhe than a house elf, but still...I don’t know. Is this more like the form your people once had?” He nodded at the curling branches and the roots that snaked shyly across the frozen ground. He found it hard to think of it as human, or elven, or anything but strange.

“No,” said Dobby. “We had no fixed form, Harry. I am remembering now. We changed from century to century, or we changed as we pleased. We would inhabit one form and learn it completely, then become another. This is the form I have chosen at the moment.” His smile, when Harry glanced cautiously back at his face, was delirious with pleasure. “The other was pleasant, but not what I wanted to learn.”

Harry nodded slowly, swallowing back his anger; the wizards who enslaved house elves had compounded their sin, then, not just tying up their magic and making them glad to serve, but binding them to one form. “And you have come to meet me now?”

Dobby looked up abruptly, and those green eyes nearly drowned Harry. “Yes,” he said, as if recalled from his delight to his purpose. “Yes, I did. I would like your word that you still do mean to free house elves, Harry. Forgive me, but you have freed none of them since me, and you have made many allies who hold house elves. It will not be

easy to persuade them to give up their possessions.” A noise like wind blowing through leaves twisted those last words. “Can you do this? Or is your commitment to human political alliances greater than your commitment to us?”

Harry felt a solid weight settle into the middle of his stomach. He had been right to come out here, after all. The last day of the year was a good one for renewing vows, or taking them.

“I am vates first and foremost,” he said quietly. “It is the only path I have truly chosen to walk. My parents, and Voldemort through their machinations, inflicted me with my scar and my magic, and my training made me into my brother’s guardian. I would have been an ordinary wizard without that, and happier for it. But I have the magic now, and that makes the vates path possible. I will walk it.”

He opened his hand, wanting some way to mark the occasion, but not wanting to use blood. He started when fire abruptly burned in the center of his palm. He recognized the brightness of it, and the sweet, mind-stirring scent that poured from it. It was phoenix fire, one of the gifts Fawkes seemed to have granted him with his sacrificial death. Harry hadn’t chosen that, either, but phoenix fire was the perfect way to mark this occasion.

He looked up at Dobby, or the creature that had once been Dobby, while the flame in the center of his palm hissed and spat and cast sparks into the snow like fireworks. “I swear to you,” he said, “by this fire, that I am vates first and foremost, and for however long it takes, I will free the house elves of their web, along with all those other species who wish to be free.”

The fire shot up into the air, abruptly, spreading bright red wings. For a moment, Harry caught a glimpse of Fawkes hovering there, and blinked back tears. Then the fire dived down into the snow, melting it and creating a burned patch on the Forest floor. Harry felt part of his magic flowing into the scar, linking him firmly to his promise.

“That will do,” said Dobby, his voice soft. “I see now why Fawkes died for you. Live well and peaceably and powerfully, vates.” He uncoiled,

and his branches lifted, and his eyes grew greener until he was nothing but a patch of green and silver, and then he was gone.

Harry, breathing deeply, turned to the centaurs and the Many. "My commitment to you is renewed, as well," he said, first in English and then repeating himself in Parseltongue. "It always will be. I know that you are free of your webs, now, but that all communities of your kind are not. They will be, someday."

"We are willing to wait," said Firenze, mildly. "We owe you a debt we cannot repay, Harry Potter vates, and we are more patient than humans understand. And we remind you, as well, of our side of the bargain. We will come forth to war when you need us."

Harry nodded. "A storm of Light will be coming to Hogwarts on Midsummer day, or a prophecy lies," he said quietly. "I will probably ask for your help then."

"And you shall have it."

"And you shall have our help," hissed the Many, their voices ebbing and blending in his ears as they always did. "We can help you as no others may. Our daughter is small enough to be carried about you, in your clothing, in your pockets, and no one will notice. And what she sees, we will see, and what she does, we will note. You need not wear her about your neck. Keep her secret, and safe."

Harry nodded. "And is there nothing else I can do for you?"

"Nothing yet. Another hive will not be hatched until next year. Then, we will need you to break the web that will try to reestablish itself."

Harry bowed a bit, grateful that the magical creatures were so much more straightforward than his human allies. Half of them would try to bargain with him in more complicated terms, and half wouldn't reveal what they wanted at all. It didn't occur to the Many to lie, though, much less arrange some dance where Harry didn't know the steps. "Thank you."

He spoke with the centaurs and the Many for a short time more, arranging the details of Firenze's visit to the giants and when exactly the Many's children would hatch, and then headed back towards the castle. He did pause on the edge of the Forbidden Forest to tuck the Many snake into his pocket. He felt quietly pleased with how his visit had gone. Snape had trusted him to go into the Forest without guards, probably knowing that nothing lived there that would hurt him, and he had managed just fine.

When he looked up, he saw a unicorn running across the grounds.

Harry caught his breath. The unicorn was little more than a streak of white, marked out by deep, dusky purple lights on his horn and hooves. Otherwise, he looked like a spirit of the snow given intelligence and substance, and he ran as if it were the morning of the world and he had never known imprisonment.

A moment, and he was gone, fading as he neared the lake, but Harry was left shivering with an awe deeper than the contentment had been. He supposed it wasn't his fate to be at peace for long.

Ah, well. This is more interesting.

"Ready, Harry?" Paton's face grinned at him through the fire. "Then come through!"

Harry tossed a handful of Floo powder into the flames, calling out, "The Welcoming Room!" He spun around several times, then got spat out into a shadowy place he'd only seen behind Paton's head as they spoke a few minutes earlier. He felt his arm clasped and tugged, as Paton both balanced him and shook his hand. He turned and looked at his ally, and wound up catching his breath.

Paton wore his tattoos without a glamour here, making his face into a mask of lines at once beautiful and strange. His dark blue robes revealed more tattoos, links that marked members of the Opalline family, soaring and spiraling around his body. Harry wondered who drew the tattoos. Was it a common pattern copied from an earlier artist? Did the magic just know instinctively how to make them? What happened when a new Opalline child was born?

“Welcome, Harry,” said Paton, and bowed to him. His white-blond hair, still cropped from Fergus’s death, was growing out again, and coiled neatly into a braid that he’d attached to a silver ring of the chain collar around his throat. “I cannot wait for you to meet the rest of my family. This is only the Welcoming Room,” he added, waving one hand at the stone room they stood in. The decorations on the walls mimicked the spreading whorls of his tattoos. “We have some space to walk before we come to the rest of Gollrish Y Thie.” He smiled at Harry, and opened the door on the other side of the small, box-like room.

No, Harry corrected himself, the small, box-like house. The Welcoming Room really was completely detached from the rest of the home the Opallines lived in. He took a few careful steps out the door, and froze.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” said Paton at his shoulder, with a self-satisfaction that Harry had to grant was justified. “Welcome to Snaefell.”

They stood on the upper edge of a long stone staircase, carved so neatly into the rock that it would be invisible from below, Harry thought. Of course, there was probably magic helping it along. All the steps bore a dip in the middle—worn by generations of feet walking up them.

Beyond and around and below the staircase extended Snaefell, which was quite obviously a mountain, and not a hill. Harry shivered as he took in the sight through the clear air; the unparalleled view over rising and soaring snowfields made him feel colder. Snaefell canted high enough, or they stood in just the right place, to see an incredible distance across both the Isle of Man and the Irish Sea. Harry saw shades of blue and gray in the water he’d never seen before, and the distant blur of land.

“The Muggles used to say that you could see six kingdoms from the top of Snaefell on a clear day,” Paton murmured to him. “England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man, and the Kingdom of Heaven. We say that we have a seventh, though, properly speaking, our home was never a kingdom. We’ve just lived here a long, long

time.” Gently, he gripped Harry’s shoulder and turned him around, unresisting, so that Harry could look to the left of where they stood.

That’s Gollrish Y Thie, Harry thought. Another span of stone steps extended from the Welcoming Room across a shoulder of the mountain, faithfully following its lines, though they rose out of the snow enough that Harry knew they must be huge. And on top of the next ridge curled a home as splendid as a rearing dragon.

Harry would have said it was a castle, but its spare, clean lines made even Hogwarts look unwarrantedly bulky and bumpy. Various wings, patterned with what looked like scales, wavered in several directions, bending and curving where another structure would have stood square or straight. Harry could make out windows sparkling with something that might have been glass or wards. The noise of voices chattering came across the distance to him, and he saw numerous small shapes, children, darting about furiously on the icy flat rock right next to the drop.

“How do you hide this from the Muggles?” he asked Paton.

Paton laughed. “We have a pretty solid illusion that makes the whole place feel like part of the mountain—something the one Light Lady ever born to our line did for us. So far as the Muggles are concerned, all of this is just part of Snaefell. They have a railroad that runs right over our roof.” He nodded towards the steps. “Shall we? It’s safe, I assure you. We have wards to either side that prevent anyone from falling off the ridge, though they won’t keep you from getting a faceful of snow.”

Harry nodded, and they began to hop from one large stone to the other, heading towards the house.

It was harder than it looked, Harry quickly found. The rocks had warming charms that melted some of the ice, but what the Opallines considered “some ice” was obviously different from what he did. He had to hop across the gaps and windmill his arms each time to stay upright. Paton, unsurprisingly, strode along as sure-footed as a mule. He smiled at each gap in between the stones, too, as if they told him tales that Harry couldn’t hear. For all Harry knew, they did.

They reached the other side with no more than one really serious slip on Harry's part, though, and then the ground was flat with flagstones all the way up to the main staircase of Gollrish Y Thie, where Harry could see a figure with long, blowing hair waiting for them. The children, who were throwing snowballs at each other and practicing spells to dump ice down the back of each other's necks, turned around and stared at him with unabashed curiosity. More than one, though, abandoned the staring to run up to Paton and clasp their arms around him with small cries of, "Jishag mooar!"

Paton scooped them up with the ease of long practice, swung each one around, and said a quick phrase in what Harry knew must be Manx. The older children, once he'd spoken to them, turned to Harry and introduced themselves with perfect politeness, hands held palm-up in front of their bodies and their heads bowing over them. Harry heard a dizzying blur of names which he didn't try to retain, though he nodded and smiled to each one. The younger tended to cluster behind the older ones, or behind Paton, chewing their braids—mostly white-blonde, but with some dark and Weasley-red mixed in for variety—and watching him shyly.

Harry tried to count all the children, but since some of them raced back to the snowball games the moment introductions were finished, it was difficult. There were more than fifty, though. Harry shook his head in wonder, and gave a sidelong glance at Paton as they finally worked their way out the other side of the crowd and towards the great steps. "You weren't kidding when you said that you're rich in blood," he said.

Paton smiled. "No. Of course, most of the time, not all of the children live at Gollrish Y Thie. We're scattered all around, as I've told you. But the New Year's celebration is a big deal, thanks to the Cooinaght. My children come from all over the world to attend it." He glanced around him with another self-satisfied look. Harry knew the expression of a man on his home ground now; Paton seemed more thoroughly at home here than even Lucius did in Malfoy Manor.

They had reached the staircase that curled up towards the main entrance of the house, and the standing figure had come down to

meet them. Harry faced her, and blinked as he saw a young woman, probably Honoria's age, with smooth brown skin and dark eyes. Her white-blond hair stood out against her coloring, and unlike most of the people around her, she didn't have it coiling in a braid, but blowing free.

"Fastyr mie," she murmured, dipping her head and holding her hands out to Harry in a version of the gesture the older children had used with him. "Good afternoon, Harry vates. My name is Calibrid."

"May I present, as she's already taken up some of the work of doing—" Paton's voice was warm and rich with affection "—my daughter and heir, Calibrid Opalline."

Harry spread his own hand in a mimicry of her gesture. Calibrid smiled, but never stopped studying him. Harry could see already why Paton had chosen her as his heir. If he wanted an observer and someone who intimately knew the strengths and weaknesses of others, he could do much, much worse.

Something was off about Calibrid, though, Harry thought as he studied her back. It was as if a song that played around most people were silent with her. He thought for a moment that she must be better at hiding her magic than many witches, but abruptly he realized what it was, and he blurted his realization out before he could stop it.

"You're a Squib!"

Calibrid's eyebrows rose, and her smile sharpened. "Ah, yes. I did wonder when you would notice. I hope you won't be unpleasant about it." Her new smile said that she could make life more unpleasant for him than he'd ever dream of making it for her.

Harry shook his head, his cheeks already burning. His training and his etiquette conscience, which had a voice like Narcissa's, were both scolding him soundly for his slip-up. "I'm sorry, my lady," he murmured. "I didn't think. I'm used to being around Dark pureblood families who value magical power when choosing an heir before all else. I didn't realize it would be different for the Old Blood, but of course I should have."

Calibrid relaxed, and dropped her hands back to her sides. "Of course it is," she echoed, and brushed her fingers along her cheeks, dissipating her glamour and calling Harry's attention to her tattoos. "I can call on the combined magical power of my family any time I should need it. Why do I need to be magical in my own right?"

Harry grinned a bit. He could think of several people in pureblood society who would be horrified to hear that, Augustus Starrise first among them. He thought they could stand to hear it.

A cutting buzz sounded from overhead, and Harry started a step back as a wasp circled around Calibrid's shoulder. Calibrid showed no alarm, but moved forward a bit as the wasp dived down behind her. A moment later, a tall young man with white-blond hair was standing where the insect had been, staring at Harry in absolute silence. Opalline tattoos curved and writhed on his fine pale skin, and his hand clutched a wand hard enough that his knuckles had lost all color.

"Doncan," said Calibrid. "He was just startled when he called me a Squib, that's all. He intended no insult to me." She reached back and laid a hand on the stranger's shoulder. Harry saw some of the tension alter in him, rather than melt, shifting to other places and positions. Doncan now leaned forward as if he were studying Harry like an insect under glass in his own right. Harry conquered the temptation to shift his own weight and stared back.

"May I present my son Doncan," said Paton, his voice dry, "a wasp Animagus and the guardian of my daughter Calibrid."

Harry turned at the use of the term "guardian." "He protects her because she has no magic?" he asked.

"That was the original justification for it, yes," said Paton. "But he also chose to do the work. And he underwent the original training that Dumbledore and your mother warped when it came to you, Harry. That training normally begins at ten years old, and the child must consent to it. Doncan consented. You did not." His eyes were dark, and his mouth tightened the slightest bit. Harry decided that he didn't want to see Paton truly angry, ever.

Harry had a few more questions now, though. "I didn't realize that Lily had the idea from anywhere," he said. He met Doncan's eyes, and realized they did look familiar, all his own emotions subdued beneath a sternness that watched for any danger to his charge. "I thought she just trained me in accordance with Dumbledore's ethics of sacrifice."

"She did," said Doncan, speaking for the first time. His voice was deep and hoarse, as if he spent a lot of his time shouting. "But she used our methods, and applied them to a flawed ideal. I am sorry for what happened to you, little brother. No one should have to suffer it. My service is joyful to me. Yours has not been."

Harry studied him some more. It was true that Doncan didn't have the lines of tension that Harry remembered as being almost constantly a part of himself when he guarded Connor. He seemed confident that most of the people around Calibrid didn't want to hurt her. Harry had never been allowed to relax to that extent; Lily had trained him to think there were Death Eaters around every corner, and in places where no Death Eaters could have been, she tested him. Harry supposed he could see how that decision, freely made, would turn out a fine warrior, and not one who resented his lot.

It made his skin prickle a bit, all the same.

"Come," Calibrid said then, extending her arm. Harry placed his hand hesitantly on it, folding his thumb back in the proper manner for a pureblood wizard being escorted by an older witch, and she nodded approval. "You have not seen the inside of Gollrish Y Thie, and you should. Everyone who comes to the Isle should." She shot a sly glance at her father. "I have even contended that we should invite Muggles here. My father says very tiresome things about the International Statute of Secrecy, but all my travels through other countries did not make me change my mind. Wizards and Muggles should know each other, I think."

"My little Calibrid is a self-styled revolutionary," said Paton, with the tone of someone pursuing an old argument.

“Because you raised me to think for myself, Father, even when that disagreed with your own thoughts,” Calibrid replied sweetly, and then they were through the great arched entrance and into the main hall of Gollrish Y Thie, and Harry was too busy staring to pay attention to the course of the argument.

The inside of the hall was patterned with more scales, but this time, Harry could see that they weren’t merely indentations or fancy carvings in the stone. They were actual scales. The great hall was made of a pair of widespread jaws that answered the question, once and for all, as to whether Gollrish Y Thie was molded after a living creature or had once been a living creature. They stepped into a lower jaw, and above them slanted another, extending on a constant angle back to the still-enormous throat. Harry swallowed as he looked up at the fangs hanging overhead like enormous stalactites. The fangs on the lower jaw had probably been broken away long ago for the safety of walkers. Rope ladders dangled from the ceiling, leading to faint darkensses of tunnel entrances among the teeth. Harry imagined they ran back into the skull proper, probably up to the muzzle and eyesockets.

“I deliberately didn’t warn you,” said Paton, standing at his side, and, Harry realized, enjoying his reaction. “I like watching the way it takes visitors. Our home was a dragon once, a dragon’s skeleton—we like to say the dragon that St. George battled, though Merlin knows if she was really that. We know her kind doesn’t exist in the British Isles any more, though.” Paton brushed a hand fondly along a wall that Harry supposed was partly bone and partly stone. “Too big, too destructive, and their fire was too hot; it vaporized instead of just burning. Wizards hunted them to extinction long ago. In fact, there’s speculation that the Killing Curse was developed to kill these dragons without close battle, since the wizards inevitably lost in a close battle.” He sighed. “Can you imagine the glory she must have been when she was alive?”

Harry could. He imagined the jaws closing on all of them, the great head lifting, the mouth tilting to spill them all down the throat...

He shivered, partly with fear and partly with a pang of loss at the thought of anything so grand and beautiful dying. Then he shook his

head resolutely. He couldn't be too angry at those ancient wizards, unless they were also the ones who had bound the house elves and the other species with webs. He had enough to worry about with the living magical creatures to protect and free.

"Now, Harry," said Paton, drawing his attention back. "The Cooing is coming."

"You mentioned that," Harry murmured. "A ritual of some kind?"

"It is a ritual." Paton's face was solemn, with no hint of teasing now. "A ritual of memory. It helps keep our family together, by showing us what we have been through and lost and won in the past year. However, I am not sure that it would be the best thing for you to experience, given all the losses that haunt your memory." He was studying Harry intently. "You are perfectly welcome to abstain from it. No one will think it an insult." Harry couldn't help glancing at Doncan, but he shook his head, eyes merciless as a hawk's. "I merely wanted to warn you, so that you don't get caught up in it, and can leave the room when it begins."

Harry thought for a moment. Did he really want to relive the graveyard twice over, and the trial, and Merlin knew what else?

But he remembered the promise he had made to himself earlier, and fulfilled in the Forbidden Forest. This was New Year's Day, a day of renewing vows and commitments. He didn't want to retreat in fear, even if it was a wise idea.

"I'll stay for it."

Paton blinked. "You are sure?" he asked, canting his head to study Harry as if he were a new tattoo unexpectedly appeared on his skin. "It is intense."

"I want to," Harry said.

Paton smiled at him. "It is wonderful to hear you say that," he said simply. "Very well, then. Calibrid will show you around Gollrish Y Thie

for a time, and let me know when she must attend other duties.” He glanced at his daughter, who nodded.

“I don’t want to keep her away from her duties,” Harry protested, a little alarmed at the thought of that much trouble being taken for him. “I mean, she’s your heir—“

“And you are a member of the family as important as any other,” Calibrid said firmly. “You were that from the moment my big brother shed his blood for you. Come along, Harry. You haven’t enjoyed a game until you’ve watched children playing tag in a dragon’s eye.” She pulled him towards one of the rope ladders, with Doncan pacing along behind them, silent as a great cat.

Harry sighed once, then gave himself over to being treated like a guest, or the little brother that both Doncan and Calibrid called him. By the time the Cooïnaght came, Harry thought he was more than ready.

He had stood in the Great Hall of Gollrish Y Thie, the dragon’s belly, and watched a display of magic meant to mimic the Northern Lights storm around him. Shining threads of purple and blue and gold and green reared up and then ran down the walls. Harry thought for a moment of dripping blood, then shook the image away and deliberately replaced it with the thought of the memory that had shone when he freed the unicorns. Then he could laugh and applaud with the rest, and admire the skill of the two girls, twins, whose magic had produced the light—two of Paton’s younger daughters, just sixteen. The twins had grinned, bowed to the crowd, and slipped away hand-in-hand.

He’d met Angelica Griffinsnest, Paton’s first wife, the mother of Fergus and Doncan and a few of his other children, who had wound up parting with him over “differences that made us good friends and not good spouses,” as she’d described it to Harry. She seemed to enjoy the company of the Opallines, though, and associated freely with all the children. Harry watched her Levitate a squeaking grandchild around the room, and had to look away, a burning in his throat.

He'd seen Calibrid carefully retrieve a Pensieve that two enormous owls had arrived carrying. She'd noticed his look, and explained, stroking the sides of the Pensieve as if it were the most precious thing in the world, that it had come from her mother, a Pakistani witch who had loved Paton and planned to marry him. Her family had required her to marry elsewhere, though, and her mother had not wished to disobey their will. She had loved Paton for a year, given birth to Calibrid, then given her to her father when she was three months old and her mother had to leave the Isle of Man. She sent a Pensieve at the end of every month containing memories of what she'd been doing in the recent past, since her husband forbade her contact with Paton. Harry swallowed down envy, and courteously—he hoped—declined the invitation that Calibrid gave him to look into the Pensieve and get to know her mother. He was just a little too jealous of her for having a mother who loved her that deeply, even years after she'd embarked on a different life.

He felt a little out of place, in fact, though everyone made some effort to include him—and for the younger children it wasn't even an effort; they showed off new spells to him and told him tales of their exploits and insisted that he play tag as naturally as they did with everyone else. A few asked about his missing hand, but accepted the story Harry invented about an evil snake biting it off. But they were so obviously a family, and Harry couldn't help feeling his lacks in the middle of them, from his parents to his missing last name.

“Gather.”

Paton spoke just the one word, and all the shouting and laughter in the hall ceased. Harry knew it was deep night from the torches that flared from cavities in the dragon's ribs, and thought it was about an hour before midnight and the turning of the year. Hundreds of solemn faces turned up now, and parents put their hands on the shoulders of children. Harry felt Calibrid draw up beside him.

She began softly translating the speech that Paton made, in rippling Manx that Harry suspected everyone in the hall but him understood.

“Now is the time of the Cooïnaght, the Remembering, the ritual in which we recall the intense passages of our past year.” As Calibrid finished translating that sentence, the torches sparked higher and higher. Not all of them, though, Harry realized with a glance. Only the twelve largest were leaping and acquiring a white tinge to the flames, twelve spaced at equal distances around the hall and from each other. “We recall this to challenge ourselves, for in remembering our mistakes, we learn not to make them in the future. We recall this to brace ourselves, for the next year may contain challenges greater than any we have faced so far. We recall this to cheer ourselves, for our victories in a year of life are never minor. We recall this to give ourselves life, for we are alive in the past as in the future, and the present is the moving shuttle that connects the tapestries of both.”

At the end of the speech, the torches extended their flames until they touched overhead. Harry couldn't help staring, trying to judge the shape of the arch. But it remained no more specific than an arch, and when sparks began to fall from it like shooting stars or fiery snow, he could do no more than watch.

The sparks grew larger, impossibly larger, as they waltzed downwards, until Harry saw the first one to come towards him like a draping blanket. He raised his arms, uncertain of what he was about to do, and then found another place, another time, tumbling around him as the spark expanded to take him in.

He stood in the Slytherin bedroom, watching himself in a tight embrace with Draco near the foot of Draco's bed. He recognized the scene after a moment's blink: the hug they'd shared after his vision of Voldemort last January, when Draco had somehow ridden along with him and ended up killing Nagini. Harry felt a shiver of several emotions, all of them too intense to be separated, ride up and down his spine. It was strange to see himself from the outside, strange to see himself with two hands, strange to really notice the content expression as he snuggled into Draco's shoulder.

The walls of the memory fell straight down around him, and another took its place. Harry smelled blood and magic, saw himself with hands extended towards a figure lying motionless in a bed, and knew he was witnessing Marian Bulstrode's birth again, at the end of

February. He'd saved Elfrida's magic, after she'd drained her own because Marian was her heir. Harry smiled. He was allowed to be proud of that, wasn't he? Yes, he thought he was. It had been the first time he'd reversed his magic-swallowing ability, and seen that he could use that swallowed strength to give life and hope back to others—the first time he'd really felt like a wizard doing what he could to help and serve other wizards, not just magical creatures.

A roar, and he was in a memory so vibrant with life that he flushed even before he saw what it was. The first kiss he and Draco had shared, which came on the spring equinox, the brightest day of his March. Harry was torn between surprised that he'd looked that terrified, and pleased that Draco looked more satisfied and deliriously happy than he'd remembered. He'd been rather too occupied with his own feelings, and expectations, and fears, to realize that it had been exactly what Draco wanted.

Darkness attacked next, erasing the bright memory like ink spilled on an overdue Potions essay. Harry looked up, and above him danced the monstrous storm that had come on Walpurgis, the wild Dark stung to fury by Voldemort's attempt to capture and manipulate it. The rage seemed almost innocent, now that Harry had seen the fury of Midwinter. He watched himself flying, hurtling through darkness with a vengeance that made him wince and suspect that Draco and Snape might have a point about how reckless he was with his life. He looked like a bit of rubble just then, a piece of trash the wild Dark might fling however it chose. April had been an intense month for him altogether, with the Maze as well as this, but this was by far the wilder memory.

Sunshine and color and light broke the darkness like dawn, and he stood in the cavern beneath Gringotts, in May, gathering and taming the magic of twelve different wizards in an effort to free the southern goblins. Power rushed into him and made him able to do so many things for those brief moments—more even than he could have done if he had swallowed their magic, since it had been willingly given over. But he had chosen to turn it back, tuck it gently into their bodies once more and refuse the temptation. Harry was less proud of that than he was of freeing the goblins, but only just.

He was prepared when sunshine became dusk, color became gray, light became darkness. It was inevitable that this would be his memory of June, burning the twenty days before it and the nine days after it to ash. He stood in the graveyard, and watched himself writhe on the stone, and heard the screams, not mindless but full of terror and pain, and watched Bellatrix sever his left hand. It did not really take as long as he had thought it did. It was less painful to watch than it was to experience. He had survived it. He told himself that, and still had to look away when the hand came free and Bellatrix laughed aloud.

July unspooled in Godric's Hollow, with him lying flat on his back next to the old isolation wards, gritting his teeth and wrinkling his forehead as he rebuilt his own mind. Harry would have preferred to watch the memory of his birthday, the day when Argutus had joined him, but he found this an unexpectedly quiet scene. He didn't stay long enough to see his own magic explode in negation, attacking the power the place had held over him, and without that, there was almost no sense of what rushed and churned in his brain.

August, and he rode the Light gryphon's back, vaulting and turning as it claimed the magic Voldemort had torn from it. Harry forced himself not to think of what would surely come with December, to try and see this memory as it had been when he experienced it. There were some advantages to the outside perspective, though: the Light gryphon flicked its tail in disdain at Voldemort as it flew away, something Harry definitely hadn't noticed at the time. He grinned, and when the next memory strewn sand beneath his feet, he was braced.

He watched himself confront Voldemort in the circle of wooden disks he'd used to destroy the sirens, and shook his head in wonder. He looked so small, so fragile. It was a wonder that his allies trusted and would follow him. Then he saw the expression on his own face when he lunged up to take the curse for Connor, and revised his estimate. He supposed it was only a mystery some of the time, and that battle on the autumn equinox had given them a chance to see both sides of him.

He was hovering in the air, a change so sudden that Harry squeaked and reached for the ground before he caught himself, shaking his

head in embarrassment. He watched himself jerk at Henrietta's sharp reminder that he was their leader, and shout warnings as he pushed his broom into a dive towards Woodhouse. Henrietta went off to play with Evan Rosier, something Harry hadn't known at the time, and he and Draco saved each other's lives so quickly that Harry barely had time to breathe, watching it, between one death and the next. He felt a stir of satisfaction in his belly as he watched them running towards Woodhouse under the full moon. Obviously, their relationship couldn't be like that all the time, but it was good to know that it could be when it needed to be.

He kept his head half-bowed during the memory of November, because sound and not sight was the important thing here. He heard his voice reciting the speech for his parents, impassioned and yet strangely dry, as if he were a cracked bone pouring all his marrow and strength into the words, keeping nothing for himself. He heard the mutters and creaks of the Wizengamot quiet, and he breathed in the absolute silence, knowing that the memory of himself would be climbing back to Draco.

Darkness and wind bore him up. Once again, he hovered, and watched as Fawkes danced and sang his death, winding down his life into a tight bolt of fire that he flung directly at Harry. This time, Harry could make out the fire fluttering beneath his chest like a heartbeat—at least, when he separated again from the Light gryphon and the tears left him in peace. He frowned and touched his own chest uncertainly. What exactly did Fawkes leave me?

The memory broke, and Harry found himself on a vision of a high mountaintop. Dark, undefined country lay below, and above him shone innumerable stars, so bright and so far away that Harry shivered. Behind him lay green, well-traveled country, he knew, but he could not turn and look at it. This was a representation of the future, and at the moment, the Cooinaght insisted he look forward.

This is still yours to choose, said a voice in his ears that might have been the Light's, if the Light knew personal compassion.

The dark land smoothed and flattened, and he stood in the Opallines' Great Hall once more, his cheeks wet with tears. A hand touched his

shoulder, and he was turned to face, not Calibrid, as he'd assumed, but Duncan.

Doncan stared into his eyes, so keenly that Harry had to control the impulse to turn away. He stared back instead, at this man who was, in an odd kind of way, his brother—trained in the way that Harry should have been trained, if Lily and Dumbledore had sought his consent in protecting Connor; part of the Opalline family, as Harry could be considered with Fergus's sacrifice of blood; a guardian in a way that Harry knew he never would be, but sharing some traits with him.

Doncan nodded. What he had seen in his face, Harry didn't know. He laid a hand on Harry's forehead, light and cool as the touch of a spiderweb, and spoke in his hoarse voice. "Welcome to the rest of your life, little brother."

Harry blinked, and realized the Great Hall was alive with fireworks, with more dazzling bursts of light, wilder than the controlled performance from earlier, and with torch flames that had abandoned their holders to dance in waltzes. Midnight had passed, and the new year had stalked in.

Harry didn't know the proper, ritual response, but he managed to incline his head, his heart beating with the weight of the past year and the excitement over what was yet to come, and say, "Thank you...brother."

Chapter Fifty-Eight: Capto Horrifer

On the tenth day of January, 1996, Albus Dumbledore broke free of his Still-Beetle confinement.

Rufus grinned. To most people who knew him, it would have been a frightening expression, but Percy Weasley knew him just that little bit better than the rest. Rufus wasn't surprised when Percy grinned back at him.

"Who is it today, sir?" he asked, with fierce eagerness.

Rufus glanced back at the list of names in front of him. "His name's Hector Dawlish," he said. "Brother of our own Auror Dawlish. We investigated him casually when his brother's name came up, but we didn't find any incriminating evidence on him. With Hestia Jones singing so sweetly, of course, we know that he's a member of the Order of the Phoenix, however much he doesn't look like it. He'll have to come when the summons arrives." Rufus clamped his teeth together, well-aware of the glow in his own eyes. This was the reason that he found paperwork so exciting. The other Aurors had always thought only a chase through the field could be this grand, but Rufus had long ago become accustomed to letting his mind do the chasing, since he had a bad leg. "And if he doesn't have anything to hide, if he's innocent, why wouldn't he show up to help the Ministry with its inquiries?"

Percy laughed, his teeth flashing. "Brilliant, sir."

Rufus grinned again. The young man was turning out excellently—a prime Auror candidate. He still spent most of his time acting as an assistant to Rufus, despite the training he was undergoing. Amelia had to admit that she could think of few better trainers in procedure, paperwork, and the rule of law than Rufus, since he'd been Head of the Office. And it helped that Percy was intelligent and didn't need much conviction on whether it was right to treat criminals just like other people. Those were the Gryffindor sensibilities shining through. What Rufus had to work on was getting him to accept that, sometimes, it was all right to bend the rules. Percy currently admired the way Rufus did it, but didn't seem able to do it himself.

Ah, well. We'll use that wand when its core is formed, as Grandmother Leonora liked to say. Rufus looked across his office at the portrait of his Muggleborn grandmother, who was looking at Percy. She tipped him a wink when she noticed him staring. Rufus nodded in satisfaction. They'd train him yet.

A knock on the door announced the arrival of Hector Dawlish. Rufus sat up. "Send him in, Tonks!" he called.

The door opened, but it wasn't Hector Dawlish who came in. A flood of darkness traveled inward, rippling, a cloud of ink that might have escaped from the Department of Mysteries and the Unspeakables' bloody experiments. Rufus opened his mouth to shout, and then it engulfed him.

He found himself kneeling in mud, blinking away rain as it fell into his eyes. He glanced down, and realized his hands were younger—about sixteen years younger. Fear clawed up his throat in metallic bitterness.

"No," he whispered, just as he had the first time this day happened, but nothing and no one heard him.

He had to stand, had to scramble up, had to turn. And then he could see. He was back on the mud-churned battlefield of the wizarding village of Valerian, in northern Scotland.

Correction. What had been the wizarding village of Valerian. Voldemort had utterly destroyed it, in the single most devastating strike of the war so far, killing not only the several hundred villagers but the twenty Aurors sent to protect them. Rufus had been among the second detachment, and he had arrived to find people who Apparated a few moments before him already dying.

And Valerian was hell.

Voldemort had turned the very rain into a weapon, with a spell that Rufus didn't know and sincerely hoped he would never see again. When the water struck his fellow Aurors, it turned into silvery knives,

and began flaying off their skins. Next to him was Georgina Catawampus, already a mindless thing screaming in so much pain that Rufus wanted to cut his ears off. The skin was gone from her chest and cheeks, revealing muscle slick and gleaming, threaded through bone, and breasts that dangled like sacks of rotten meat, and a skin slowly peeling down her sides like the wrapping of a Christmas present. Georgina was begging for death with those words that Rufus could still understand.

He'd Apparated in just the right place to avoid the spell, or else it was faltering thanks to the extra-strong waterproofing spells on his clothes, which Grandmother Leonora had made him. Either way, he had to venture further on foot into that place of mud and blood and rain and knives, and figure out some way to stop the Death Eaters, whom he could hear laughing like rats from a short distance away.

But he was afraid.

He forced himself a step forward.

Then a Death Eater appeared before him. Logically, Rufus knew he must have Apparated, and he just hadn't heard the crack amid the screaming, but he shuddered all over anyway. It really did look as if the Death Eater had sprouted out of the chaos around them, with robes of flayed flesh and a mask of bone.

"You will die," said the Death Eater in a confident, smooth voice, the voice that Rufus knew he would hear again a year later, when Lucius Malfoy widened his eyes and denied being in control of his own will for as long as he'd been a Death Eater. It was one reason Rufus was never going to trust the bastard. Imperius Curse or not, he'd stood on a battlefield with that screaming going on around him, and still been able to concentrate on fighting an enemy.

Rufus managed a shaky version of the correct head-bow that began a duel. Malfoy laughed, and then moved forward with his cloak boiling behind him. No fool, he tried a Killing Curse first, and Rufus barely managed to dodge it, limping thanks to his bad leg; he still wasn't completely used to the wound then, and how it slowed him in battle.

He still saw it in his dreams, sometimes, how close that green fire had swooped to him.

And then their duel began, the most fearsome hour of Rufus's life. Even knowing he had survived it once, that he must be caught in a memory, did not keep him from shaking in fear.

And then his leg went out from beneath him, and he looked down the end of Lucius Malfoy's wand, and he realized there was no guarantee that this memory would end like the real thing, not at all.

Lily lifted her head slowly when the darkness came hunting down the corridors of Tullianum. She thought it might be Harry, come to free her, but cloaked in night. Perhaps this was his last act before he completely became a feral Dark Lord, she thought: freeing the mother who had tried to keep him from becoming one, letting her walk in the sunlight one more time. And then she would help to lead the force opposing him.

So strong was the fantasy that she at first didn't realize her surroundings had changed. When she did, she sat up and looked around, hopeful. Had Harry simply Apparated her out of her cell and into freedom? That would be best. Then she wouldn't have to face him until the end, when she could look into his eyes and hear him say his last words before Albus cut him down.

Then she recognized her surroundings, and long dread and slow terror clutched at her gut like tapeworms. She was in the kitchen of Godric's Hollow, and behind her was the glow of Christmas lights. There was soft music playing. She'd been levitating the dishes to clean them, just a moment ago. This was the Christmas when she had lost her magic. But what had brought her back here? How could she have come back here, when she knew that that time was more than two year ago?

"Mother."

And the voice behind her was the one she feared so much that she still woke shaking from dreams of it. It was Harry's voice, but stripped of all the compassion she had taught him. It was a simple, blank thing

full of childish glee. That she had never heard it like that didn't matter to Lily. What mattered was that someday, she could hear it like that.

And now she was.

She tried to back a step away from him, but she knew even as she moved that her magic was gone, that aching hollow feeling that she'd only got used to with a year's passage. She could do nothing to oppose her son. She was utterly helpless.

And Harry stepped forward with his magic visible around him as a darkening of the air, full of crows and gibbering faces and impossible things, his mouth twisted in a sneer.

"I've already drunk Connor's magic," he whispered. "And James's, and Sirius's, and Remus's. Why do you think I was hiding from your notice all these months? To prepare myself, Mother. To learn things that you would never have let me learn. Dark Arts are the least of what I can do." He smiled, and the smile made Lily sink to the ground, arms over her head, screaming.

"Let me show you what I can do," Harry continued, and he moved one arm down and to the side.

Lily jerked as he yanked her spine free of her body. She had never imagined pain like that. It spread through her, touching every nerve, making her shriek and shriek and shriek as the middle of her back went missing and the spine danced in front of her eyes, a long strip of bone ornamented with gore.

"You might be wondering why you're still alive." Harry's eyes were merciless. "Because we're just getting started, you see. And I've enacted spells that will make you survive much worse tortures than this. Connor, too. Would you like to see him raped by a werewolf? I think I can manage that, since Remus's going to be turning soon."

Lily knew this wasn't how the memory had gone, but it didn't seem to matter. If someone could find a way of altering the past, then Harry would. The fear ate her alive, and as Harry called for his brother, she

let it. It seemed so much better than remaining sane through what was to come.

James woke to light of a kind he hadn't seen in months. He blinked, and shook his head, and stumbled to his feet. He'd been dreaming a moment ago. He didn't know what had awakened him. But if it made him stand in a street like this, with sunlight pouring over him—even if the street did seem to be in a pretty shabby part of London—he wasn't about to object. Perhaps the Aurors had been transporting him and lost control of the Apparition in such a way that he landed alive and out of their custody. James had heard that that sometimes happened with Muggles and Squibs.

He looked around hopefully, and then caught sight of a house in front of him. It was familiar: Sirius's home, Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. He supposed it was Regulus Black's house now, since there was news that he'd come back from the dead, but either way, the wards were down. He could hide there. James stumbled forward, then shook himself and tried to walk confidently. He was free. He should act like it, or someone would notice and get him arrested by the Muggle authorities, even if the Ministry had lost track of him.

Heavy robes swished around his feet. James looked down, curious. He wore an Auror's uniform. And then he realized there was a wand in his pocket, and magic burning in his body.

And he knew where he was. When he was.

His eyes rose back to the house, and he whispered, "No. I—I can't."

But he knew what he would find if he opened the door: Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrage hiding there. This was just after the attacks on his boys and the Longbottoms, the night that Voldemort fell. James, in blind rage, had chased the Lestranges through one safe place and finally worked out where they must be hiding. He'd gone in, and dueled Bellatrix, and done something, literally, Unforgivable to her.

Held her under Crucio, his brain whispered gleefully. Did you forget? And did you forget how good it felt?

James shuddered and buried his head in his arms. He'd had to face the Dark in himself, and he'd hated it. He'd quit the Aurors the next day and gone home to live in peace and quiet with his family—until he realized that one of his sons might carry the same Dark seed that lived within him, that same love of pain.

He could just refuse to go into the house, though. If he had this memory to live a second time, then he didn't need to do things exactly the same. He'd refuse.

And perhaps that would change everything, James thought suddenly, his heart rising like a phoenix. Perhaps he could go home to Godric's Hollow and pay attention to both Harry and Connor, and insure that they were raised the way they should be. He'd spoil Harry just as much as Connor, and then Harry would love him and never turn against him. He would never be a failure. He would never be arrested. He could remain in the Aurors and have the life he should have had.

But the moment he decided that, an outside force seemed to grip and move his body. James found himself walking steadily towards the house, his wand in his hand, his lips twisted in a sneer.

"No!" he screamed, his mouth twisting weirdly; it wouldn't move out of the sneer even while he yelled the word.

The force made him march up the steps. The force made him kick the door in. The force made him duel Rodolphus, and take him out easily, and then it puppeted him through an intense fight with Bellatrix Lestrange, in which he had to leap and dodge hexes and fire them like a much younger man. But James felt old, old, filled with dread and terror that should have weighted his limbs down, and did not.

Then Bellatrix said what she did about wanting to put Harry and Connor under Crucio.

And James snapped, and struck her with the Cruciatus Curse. This time, though, when sanity had eventually returned to him in the original memory and he had let her go—though with her mind already broken, of course—he didn't let her go. The force made him open his mouth in a laugh as he watched her writhe, and he realized that, in

this new version of the past, he would torture Bellatrix Lestrange until she was dead. But that would not be for a long, long time.

This was not a dream. It was a nightmare.

And within himself, since the force that gripped him would permit no new tears to run down his cheeks, James wept.

Albus stretched his arms and stepped out of the wreckage of his cell. It had taken him nearly two months to work up the rage necessary to break free of his confinement, and to overcome his commitment to the Light so that he could reconcile himself to using Dark Arts. But now it had been done. Albus felt a great peace welling up from the center of himself. He had accepted that he was a sacrifice, that it was not his destiny to face Harry and Tom and rid the world of them. His life was given over, instead, to using this spell, a Dark Arts one so powerful that his mentor would be unable to ignore it. It would blaze across Britain like a great fire, and draw Tom's attention, certainly, but also that of his mentor. Tom would be cautious, unwilling to approach a sudden, unknown rival. The man Albus loved and revered would come, though he would hang about on the edges first and observe matters before diving in. It was his way.

He'd used Capto Horrifer.

He passed men and women writhing on the ground, or standing still with desperate faces, or screaming, as they relived their most fearsome memories. Each memory was twisted in a new way, so that they couldn't have the comfort of knowing they would live through it again. In some cases, the memory would simply form new mental scars. In others, if the spell lasted long enough and the memory was intense enough, the victim would die.

Albus knew some people would probably perish in the Ministry before the day was through—the old witches and wizards whose hearts had labored long, those whose most fearsome experiences had taken them close to death, those who lost control of their sanity in the midst of the memory and committed suicide rather than continue to face the endless creative horrors of the spell. That was all right. He accepted it. Better some sacrifices than all of them dead before Harry or Tom's

will. And he regretted those of his own followers caught in the maelstrom, because they happened to be located in the Ministry, but there was no way to spare them. Capto Horrifer was limited by the walls of a building. It had to be cast on everyone in the Ministry or no one at all.

He paused, though, when he'd worked his way out of Tullianum and was standing in a hall filled with writhing and crying Ministry employees. It wasn't true that he could do nothing but wait for his mentor to arrive. After all, he'd accounted for him and for Tom, but there was one more person who would sense an explosion of Dark magic this intense and probably try to interfere. Harry.

If Albus gave him time, he'd arrive with Severus at his back, or possibly Severus and Minerva, and Albus had no doubt he'd arrive prepared. Capto Horrifer had a distinct feel to it, especially across distances and with as much power as he'd put behind it. The moment Harry described it, Severus would know what spell it was, and he could give Harry a potion that would guard his mind against it. There was a possibility that Harry might stop him before the spell could penetrate the deep walls guarding his mentor's mind and bring him back.

For that matter, Minerva, bound as she was to the wards of Hogwarts and the Founders' spirits now, might sense him.

That could not be allowed to happen.

Closing his eyes, Albus reached for bonds in the center of himself that he'd let lie for a long time. Once he'd worked the initial spell to establish that web, the best thing was to leave it alone. He'd wanted it intact, of course, and then he'd had some notion of using it as a bargaining chip when they arrested him. But the Still-Beetle confinement, and the fact that only Hestia Jones came to talk to him when he was free, didn't allow him to tell anyone.

Inside him lay a web connected with the wards of Hogwarts. He'd tied some of them to a statue deep in Hogwarts's tunnels, but Minerva could have found and destroyed that. He'd also, unknown even to Godric, looped some threads around his own magical core. If worst

came to worst, he would destroy Hogwarts and the secrets and treasures inside her before he allowed Tom to take her.

Now, he didn't see the need to do that. And he couldn't use the Light portion of the spell that would have made him kill himself for the good of others anyway.

But he could and did send Dark Arts flowing down the web, poisoning it, making it collapse, and causing Hogwarts's wards to start to unravel.

There. That should give Minerva something to think about.

And as for Harry...

Albus didn't have his wand. He didn't need it. He was as competent with wandless magic as Tom or Harry, but he'd seen fit to hide that. He thought even Severus, more observant than most of them, believed that he mostly used his wand and his compulsion gift, and forgot the immense reserves of his power sleeping below. But Albus was a Lord, as strong as a Lord, stronger than Harry was. He'd never figured out quite how he matched up against Tom, but then, they'd never fought directly long enough for him to do so.

Now, he reached out, and when he spoke, his voice was strong and firm and carried all his will. "Accio Harry Potter!"

It was...strange, coming back to the world. He'd gone wandering in his own mind five decades before, rejoicing in the secrets of Light and Dark without fading into either one of them. So long as he stayed wrapped in his own preservation spells, and made both Light and Dark think they might be able to claim him as a Lord, he'd stayed alive. He was nearly six hundred years old now, and had pretended to die multiple times. Strange, that.

Everything was strange in the first moments he was back in his body, though. He stretched stiff limbs, and massaged his left arm. Then he stilled and turned his head to the south.

There was an explosion of Dark magic swarming there, and it had Albus's distinctive touch. He felt himself catch his breath. What could have happened to make Albus choose Dark Arts? His commitment to the Light had been complete—a good thing, given the compulsion gift he carried. And it had been satisfying, too, to know that a Light Lord was emerging into a world shortly to have two Dark Lords in a row. Life was about balance. So he had always claimed, and so he had deliberately retained the ability to pass between poles, never quite Declaring. He had to be able to dance in order to balance the wizarding world, in order to give it stability and the unchanging equilibrium it so badly needed after the centuries of chaos it had endured. He'd been glad to hand that task on to Albus and retreat into his own mind and the Strange Paths, but he'd known it couldn't be forever.

It had to be a sacrifice. Albus had encountered something he couldn't handle, and called on his old mentor to handle it instead.

Falco Parkinson nodded, and slipped into his sea eagle form, and rose, wings cutting the air strongly as he remembered how to fly, speeding south. It seemed that it was his duty to save magic from itself, again.

Harry frowned and bent over the book. Now that he had some leisure to study the Durmstrang problem again, he thought he was on to something. This book, which was about life debts, argued that any kind of powerful bond between strong wizards, even one of hatred, could let someone pass through a lightning ward. Harry hated Bellatrix Lestrange enough that he had to wonder if this would work after all.

Now if the book would only give him some details on how to do it, instead of just claiming it was possible!

The world around him blurred and began to swing. Harry lifted his head, startled. Then he found himself looking at the far wall of the library, as if a string were extended from it that controlled his movements.

Merlin.

Somewhere far to the south, Dark magic was burning. A greasy film slid along his skin. Harry shivered in fear and disgust. This wasn't quite like the Unforgivable Curses, but nearly as bad. He shoved his chair back, ignoring Madam Pince's squawk, and began to run. He had to find someone who could tell him what that spell was. Acies or Snape would be the best choice.

It had to be Voldemort who was using that much Dark magic, and that meant he'd made a major strike. Harry felt his mouth thin. He still hadn't managed to sever his mental connection with Draco completely, but he'd come close in their last practice session; just as Draco could feel the boundaries of his mind and Harry's body, Harry could feel the boundaries of their separate selves. If he collected only the bits of himself that were himself on the next jump into Voldemort's mind, he should go alone. And then he could learn when the fuck Tom was planning things like this.

He came out of the library and paused, for a moment, his mind glittering like the crystal it had become on his way to the battle on the beach. Where would Acies be? No telling, since she didn't have a class right now. Where would Snape be? Teaching one of the fourth-year Potions classes. Harry nodded and turned. The dungeons were fairly far away, but it was better to seek someone whose location he knew than waste time in fruitless hunting. Time was already wasting.

He got exactly three strides down the hall, and then Hogwarts's wards gave a little sigh and melted.

Harry froze, his heart hammering. He's here.

Voldemort must have coordinated simultaneous strikes on whatever target in the south he'd chosen—the Ministry, most likely—and the school. Somehow, he'd undone the wards, and now he could come into Hogwarts and hurt defenseless children, if he chose to. And of course he would choose to.

Harry's mind became extraordinarily clear. He was ready to die, if that was what it took. He turned to find a window, so he could see how many Death Eaters Voldemort had come with, or if it was only the

Dark Lord himself, hoping to get inside the school before anyone could notice him. Harry had noticed him, though.

He began to call up his magic as he had only called it up once before, the night that he battled the Tom Riddle of the diary, possessing him in his head.

And a great, Portkey-like pulling hooked into his navel and jerked him away. Harry had the feeling of trees and countryside and villages skimming past, and then he landed in a corridor thick with the greasy feeling of the Dark spell. He barely caught himself with his hand before he went spinning into a wall.

Good plan, Tom, you bastard, Harry thought in cold admiration as he balanced. Don't know how you did it, but moving me to the site where you've already got followers and away from Hogwarts itself was a wonderful idea. Too bad it won't work, since I'm just going to Apparate back, and to hell with all the Ministry wards I'll tear along the way.

He was tensing to do so when darkness ate him alive.

Harry blinked and tried to stand up. Then he realized he couldn't. He was flat on his back on a reddish-black block of stone, and Voldemort stood before him, laughing, and Bellatrix Lestrange was approaching with a knife, and overhead hung the looming dusk and living warmth of Midsummer.

And he had two hands.

Some kind of memory spell, Harry thought, forcing his brain to think, to move, wielding Lily's training like thorns to sting himself into flight. That's all it is. What happens to me here isn't real. And I know what's going to happen, don't I? I relived this on New Year's night, though not, I have to admit, in this position. I survived it once, so I can survive it again.

His first indication that something was wrong came when Bellatrix knelt and roughly grabbed his right hand instead of his left. She gave him a grotesque smile, and whispered, "Wonder, baby, what you'll

look like with both your hands and both your feet gone? So cute. So cute.”

Harry heard himself scream, a cry that seemed to empty his brain and his lungs both at once. Voldemort moved in front of him and cast the Crucio, and then his scar began to burn, and Bellatrix’s knife was descending on his right wrist, and Harry was panting and thrashing and screaming hoarsely, and he wanted to die or disappear or run or lose his mind or—

Albus shook his head sadly as he watched Harry writhe. He knew exactly what memory the boy would be reliving, and he was sorry for it. But Harry would survive this. He was too young and too strong to commit suicide or have his heart give out under the fear. Albus would do his part in weakening him, though, so that Falco could have an easier task of it when he returned.

Harry’s magic, bucking fiercely, nearly shook off the Capto Horrifer. Albus clucked his tongue and pressed down with his stronger power. That wouldn’t do, if the boy woke up before Albus was ready or Falco was here. Then he would probably strike back at the author of his torments without pausing to see who it was. That wasn’t part of the plan.

Albus paused when he’d contained Harry in the memory again. Someone else could still come after Harry, couldn’t they? They might not know he was missing yet, but they could find out, and possibly cast spells that would tell them where he’d gone. He had to prevent that, too.

He wove wards around the Ministry, his own, Dark defensive spell piled on Dark defensive spell. Many of them were wards the Death Eaters had once used to protect their own homes from Auror raids. Albus was sure they could appreciate the irony, if they ever noticed it.

Then he sat back and watched Harry scream, and was content. Draco slipped into the library. Harry thought he didn’t know that he’d been studying ways to get rid of the lightning ward again. Harry was wrong, and, sometimes, dense. Draco knew, and he planned to surprise him in the library and haul Harry outside to get some fresh

air. The Slytherin-Ravenclaw Quidditch match wasn't that far away. Draco wanted to see Harry flying and laughing and practicing his Seeker skills.

All right, maybe I just want to see him laughing. Besides, it's a nice distraction from Father's latest letter.

He found Madam Pince screeching over a book at the table Harry usually studied at, and frowned. Normally, he would have beat a hasty retreat so the librarian wouldn't accost him, but she was near Harry's table. "Madam Pince?" he ventured.

Madam Pince spun around, and apparently found him a convenient audience to rant at. "You tell your friend Harry that he's not allowed in here again, never! Not if he's going to fling books down and dash out of the room! Not if he won't treat my babies with the care they deserve!" She wrapped her arms around the book as if it really were a baby and rocked it. Draco couldn't see much of the title, but he did make out Bonds.

He swallowed. That didn't sound good. If Harry had found something useful in the book and dashed away, he might be on his way to Durmstrang right now to see if he could break through the lightning ward.

"I'll tell him, Madam Pince," he said, and then ran out of the library, touching the golden bracelet that had been Harry's Christmas present to him with his left hand. "How is he?" he whispered.

Into his head spoke a cool voice that sounded disconcertingly like Hermione Granger's. Suffering. Tortured. In intense mental and physical pain.

"Fuck!" Draco didn't realize he'd said that aloud until a Hufflepuff prefect, passing him in the hall, gave him a scandalized look. Draco sneered at her and curved his right hand back to touch the bracelet. "Take me to him."

He felt a deep surge of magic that seemed to rise from beneath his feet, as if a fountain would spring up and carry him there. For a

moment, the world turned into blurs of color and motion, and then stopped. Draco blinked at nothing. He wondered why the bracelet could possibly have failed.

Then Harry's words came back to him: the bracelet couldn't take him to Harry's side through powerful wards. And, of course, if he'd gone to Durmstrang and made a mistake that got him Crucio'd under Bellatrix Lestrange's wand, the lightning ward was probably still up.

Draco's mind galloped in circles for a moment. Then he headed for the Slytherin dungeons, so fast that he knew several professors would yell at him for running in the halls. He didn't give a damn. There was one more thing that might work, and even that was chancy.

And if it didn't work—

He just wasn't going to think about that, was all. He was more frantic than he'd been in the graveyard when he had to possess Yaxley. Then, he'd been able to see Harry right in front of him, and know what had to be done. This time, he had no idea what was happening, and no idea what he should do when he got where he was going. He only knew he had to go.

He flung himself through the door of the Slytherin common room, lunged up the stairs, sent the door of their bedroom banging off the wall and into himself with the push he gave it, and suppressed a furious howl as he fell to his knees beside his trunk and began to dig through it. Ceremonial dagger, dragon carving, Potions book, no no—

There it was. Draco's hands shook as he uncovered the coin that his mother had given to him for Christmas. It looked like a Sickle, if a Sickle had the Black crest on one side and Cousin Arcturus's head on the other. His mother had pressed it into his hand when he gave her a questioning look, and explained the use of it—that it would grant him one wish and one wish only, if it came down on the side he'd called while it was in flight. Draco had been awed, and promised to keep it safe and only use it when he had true need.

Now, he did.

Trying not to think of what would happen if the coin didn't come down on the side he called, he tossed it into the air. For a moment, his mind blanked on what side he should call, but then he remembered what Narcissa said had come up when his mother had taken Aunt Bella's hand, and he shouted, "Heads!"

The coin came down. Roll, roll, roll—and it collapsed, showing his cousin's head uppermost. Draco wanted to shut his eyes in relief, but he kept them open long enough to see the black sparkle that told him the coin was ready.

Draco nodded. "Send me to Harry's side," he commanded, "and let me be prepared to help him when I get there."

Black forks of lightning struck from the coin, grabbed him, and shot towards the opposite wall. Draco felt his substance sucked and pulled out of him as if he were a spider and the lightning a wasp, and then he was sent.

Chapter Fifty-Nine: First Time, First Choice

Draco landed on stone, which told him this was probably Durmstrang, and rolled over, springing back to his feet, where a single glance told him that, no, this was not Durmstrang.

He stood in the middle of a corridor filled with wizards and witches clad in robes with plebian designs on them, their eyes fixed on nothing and their voices moaning or crying for help. And in front of him lay Harry, his voice uttering screams that made Draco twitch, and his eyes shut hard enough that almost no tears leaked out from beneath the lids, and in front of him stood Dumbledore, lifting his head to regard Draco with slow surprise.

Draco felt a surge of terror try to take him. In another life, he might have knelt shivering on the floor, unable to do anything.

But rage ate the terror. As long as he was acting Gryffindorish, Draco supposed, then he might as well be hideously angry at the powerful wizard hurting the boy he loved.

“What spell did you use on him?” he demanded.

Dumbledore smiled. It was the kind of smile Draco had seen the Headmaster give in the morning across the staff table, when he was benevolently observing his contained little world of Hogwarts and seeing nothing wrong with it. “You’re about to find out,” he said, and nodded over Draco’s shoulder.

Draco turned to look. Darkness came at him, whirling like the central funnel cloud of a great storm.

But, when it touched him, it shredded into black ribbons and fell to the floor. Draco blinked and turned back to Dumbledore.

I did say that I wanted to arrive prepared to help Harry, he thought. The coin probably protected me from the effects of this spell, whatever it is—no, wait, I know what it is. Reading the books on Dark Arts that his father had suggested he study over the past few summers had come in handy after all. This would be Capto Horrifer.

And that would explain why Harry was on his back, too. The spell caused the victims to relive their most fearsome memories, but twisted them into a new abundance of horrors, so that the victims couldn't simply count on surviving the way they had the first time. Harry must be dreaming of that moment in the graveyard when Bellatrix had taken his hand.

Draco's rage blasted away his surprise and his rationality again. He could sense Dumbledore getting past his own surprise, probably preparing another spell to attack Draco and hold him there, or perhaps torture him, or perhaps kill him.

He didn't hesitate to think whether this was a good idea. It was the only one which might work, so he did it. He fixed his eyes on Dumbledore's and jumped, out of his mind and into the former Headmaster's, wondering dimly as he flew why it felt as if the air had turned heavy and surging, filled with thunder as well as the greasy film of this particular spell.

Albus had been surprised by the arrival of the Malfoy boy, but there were Dark artifacts that could have permitted the boy to pass his wards. At least there seemed to be no rescuers coming after him, and once the Capto Horrifer spell failed, he knew something stronger would be needed. He started to prepare a binding curse that would make Draco see what Harry was seeing and suffer, helpless as a ghost in his memory-world, even if Albus could not bind him into his own thoughts.

Then his head rocked on his neck, and someone struck his mind a powerful blow. Albus slid down a long, dark tunnel, scrabbling frantically for control. It didn't come to him. He was falling faster and faster, into some quiet corner of his thoughts where he would be able to watch but do nothing to control his body.

No. Somehow, the boy had acquired the power to possess other wizards, which Albus wished he had known before now, but he had faced this before. Tom had tried to possess him more than once. Albus was a master Legilimens, and he knew his own mind too well to permit someone to intrude for long.

And there was no way that Draco Malfoy could be more powerful and experienced than Tom Riddle.

Albus imagined a tunnel opening in his mind, taking him to the side instead of down as the boy envisioned, while at the same time using a whisper of Legilimency to make it look as if he had been sufficiently startled to fall all the way. Draco was satisfied, and turned his body, making it step forward and kneel beside Harry. One hand reached out and stroked Harry's forehead. Draco said soothing words in Albus's voice which Albus didn't let himself listen to. They would only distract him at this juncture.

He had thrown Tom off with an attack from behind and below, clad in Legilimency that continued to make it look as if he cowered in the background and didn't know what to do. He employed the same technique with this boy, swimming undetectably as he gathered his magic, focusing on the incantation that he wanted to use. It would be best if he killed Draco Malfoy the moment he threw him out of his mind, so that he would not continue to be a nuisance.

He thought he could do it. Draco Malfoy was not Harry Potter, any more than he was Tom Riddle. Albus had been cautious about pushing Harry too much; threaten to kill him, and his magic might rally and defend him, to the point of slaying Albus before he could be sure that his mentor had seen his signal. Trapping him in his mind was the best way to both weaken him and make sure the Capto Horrifer burned until Falco arrived. The spell would end when Albus died—and he fully expected his mentor to kill him, but by then, the magic would have served its purpose.

Draco Malfoy, though, was not a Lord-level wizard, nor a Legilimens. Albus sharpened all his thoughts, bearing down on a certain spell, a Dark Arts one he had studied but never cast. That was not going to matter, though, not with his will and not with the strength of his magic.

Diduco mentem. It would divide and scatter Malfoy's thoughts to the point where he could never draw them back together; fragments and sparks of himself would wander into corners of the Ministry and the wizarding world. It had to be cast when the victim's mind was out of

his body, tumbling helplessly through the air, and thus it wasn't often used. Albus thought it would be perfect for the moment before Malfoy managed to recover from the shock of the attack.

He waited a moment more, to be sure that Malfoy was engaged in fumbling for his magic, trying to figure out how to use it to perform a wandless Finite Incantatem on Harry.

Then he struck.

Draco felt a shock wave travel up to him and try to bear him out of Dumbledore's body. It had edges, and it had strength, and he knew it could cut him up or crush him if he stayed. The overwhelming impulse was to flee the foreign mind and go back to his own body.

But if he did that, then Dumbledore might kill him, or Harry.

Draco didn't want that to happen.

He instead turned and leaped as the shock wave of magic came at him, possessing it as, a moment ago, he had possessed the whole of Dumbledore's mind. He felt wrenched out of all proportions. Of course, he had no body now, and it had always been the body that he and Harry practiced with, and which he'd learned to wield like a weapon. Draco felt strange sensations crowding in on him, the reports of strange senses, and knew that trying to interpret them all would drive him mad.

And then he'd either die, or fade away, or return to his body and be helpless.

He forced himself to ignore all the oddities that being a piece of magic was giving him. He concentrated on only two things: the image of Harry screaming in pain at Dumbledore's hand, and one of the training exercises that his father had taught him long ago, when he was learning to control his accidental magic and move to a practice wand.

Can you envision the wand core? It will be dragon heartstring, or phoenix feather, or unicorn hair, because those are the cores from

which Ollivander makes all his wands, and a Malfoy buys only from an Ollivander. Now, ignore the dissimilarities between the cores. What matters is that they are all long and thin. Your magic runs up them, constrained, narrow, and then spreads out of the end of the wand like a blade of sunshine. That is the image you must learn to master, Draco. Your accidental magic is too wide at the moment. It must be focused.

Draco had learned to focus; he'd managed his first spells with a practice wand while he was still very young. He fell easily into the old visualizations now. The piece of Dumbledore's magic he'd snatched wasn't a wand core, but the same principle applied. Draco compressed it firmly, and let his own magic pass through it like a narrow beam of sunshine, which widened when it had the room to spread.

He didn't know exactly what he'd done, but he knew, as if he had ears attuned only for this, that Dumbledore was in pain. He turned and sent the narrow beam of his own magic through the magic he'd possessed again, and this time felt whatever spell or trap Dumbledore had prepared tremble and shatter like ice.

Now he had to move quickly, because Dumbledore might try something back in the world of bodies. The quickest, the cleverest, the most imaginative wizard was the one who most often won on a battlefield, both his parents and Professor Snape had taught him, rather than the most powerful, because power didn't mean anything if you didn't know where to send it or what to do with it. Lashing out with accidental magic and hoping to hit something was so much less elegant than aiming a wand, chanting a spell, and having it do exactly what you wanted it to do.

Draco aimed himself. He forced and focused all his will onto one target: Harry free from the spell Dumbledore had cast and back in possession of his sanity. He remembered what he knew about inventing spells. Will was important, and need, but if he could give it an incantation to focus it, that was wonderful; raw, new magic responded best to incantations, following the example of countless other spells as they came into existence.

“Exsuscita!” he cried—if not aloud, then somewhere in his mind. He certainly seemed to hear the word, blowing past his ears on wings of fire. “Exsuscita iterum! Exsuscita iterum atque iterum!”

Awaken! he thought, flinging the words through the narrow core of his will, towards the vision at the end of his wand. Awaken a second time! Awaken again and again!

The words coiled through him like a tearing fire, or like a filament spun from his very being, pulling so much material from him that Draco wondered irrelevantly if this was what it felt like when a woman gave birth: the pulling and parting of her own flesh, the sudden separation of what had been a smaller piece of her. Then he lost all considerations of such things as his thoughts fell away from him, and he blended into pure white fire. There was a moment when he knew nothing but what he was doing. Awaken, act, rise, be awake--

The next moment, Dumbledore threw him out of his head.

Draco came back to himself in mid-tumble. He slammed into his body at the next moment, and if Dumbledore had flung a spell at him to try and kill him, it missed altogether. He bent over, his breath rasping in his throat, burning as if he had been breathing air thick with ice. He noticed the odd, thundering feeling around him again, but he still didn't know what it was, and he barely cared. Creating that spell on the fly had taken nearly everything out of him. He started to sag forward.

A hand caught him. Draco looked up. His heart bounded, and he found a new strength and cared again, as he realized that he had landed near Harry's head, and Harry was sitting up, his hand on Draco's arm to prevent him from falling. His eyes were fixed on Draco's face, solemn and wide-awake again.

Then dark snakes lashed into being around him, and the walls of the corridor turned to ice.

Harry turned to face Dumbledore. Draco stepped up, grinning, ready to help any way he could, and to enjoy the fun.

Harry heard the voice as a distant cry on the horizon at first. Bellatrix had removed his right hand and right foot, and was moving to start on his left foot. Her hoarse laughter never varied. Neither did the burning scarlet gaze fixed on him, and of course Harry had no way into unconsciousness to escape the pain.

Nevertheless, the voice was there, repeating, in Latin, "Awaken a second time!"

Harry blinked as the poison-colored sky of his hell began to burn. White flame was consuming it, bit by bit. Neither Voldemort nor Bellatrix appeared to notice, but Harry didn't care if they noticed or not. He wanted to escape, and he was beginning to think, for the first time since the horror had taken him, that perhaps this was not real, after all.

The voice soared again, triumphant as a diving falcon. "Exsuscita iterum atque iterum!"

The sky tore apart as if it were sliced by the dive of a falcon itself. Light poured in from every corner, and Harry remembered that this had happened once, and no matter what the pain, he had lived through it the once and had no reason to live through it again. He was not guilty of a crime that horrible. He was not ashamed of what he was, to think he had to return to the last days before his parents and Dumbledore were arrested and make things right again. And he was not that weak-minded, to think that he somehow deserved this.

The mental chains holding the horror in place slipped. Harry sprang upward as if he had wings, and then he was back in his body, and he knew the voice that had called him for Draco's.

He turned just in time to keep Draco from falling to the floor, and hoped that his eyes said all the things he didn't have the breath or the time to speak right now. Draco smiled as if he had heard them, and then moved to stand behind him as Harry felt his anger ride the air. Cold and snakes, he thought, the ways he always got angry.

And he was angry, but there was something more to it, this time. He recognized the thunderous feeling in the air, the shifting and stirring of power, though he didn't know what it meant. It said a prophecy was in motion, and from the spell Dumbledore had used and the way that Draco was standing at his right shoulder, Harry suspected he knew which one it was.

But that's impossible, his mind tried to chatter at him, distracting him. That would mean that the prophecy talked about Dumbledore and not Voldemort, and that's simply fucking impossible—

Harry shut the voice away. He had a Dark Lord to deal with, and the spell he could see the people in the corridor under, the same one that had enslaved him, had stripped away his every impulse to mercy. He meant to kill Dumbledore, now.

He moved a single step forward, noticing that Dumbledore had come back to his feet and was watching him calmly. At least, most people would have thought he was calm. His eyes had none of their usual twinkle, and they moved in more than one direction, instead of staying focused solely on Harry's face. He was frightened, Harry knew. Good. He should be.

He eased another step forward, Draco right behind him, a hand resting on his right shoulder now, and Dumbledore broke the silence.

"There is no need to settle this with violence, Harry," said Dumbledore, in a soft, pleasant voice that Harry just barely remembered from his childhood, when he'd used it to reinforce the lessons that Lily taught him. "We are both powerful wizards. We are both doing what we do for the good of the world. Why should we not form an alliance? I will speak for the rights of witches and wizards, and you can speak for the rights of magical creatures."

"I don't trust you," said Harry. He had never felt like this before. The whole world was crystalline, and forgiveness had no place in it. He saw a road leading him straight to Dumbledore, and at the end of that road was death. "Never again." He reached down into his magic, gathering it the way he had when he thought Voldemort had come to Hogwarts. The snakes and the ice vanished; Harry didn't have the

strength to waste in frivolous displays of his anger. His magic began churning around him, not wild, but cold and calm and deep, a spreading maelstrom. Harry fixed his gaze on Dumbledore and waited to see how he would respond to that. Did he recognize the feeling of prophecy in the air?

"I can feel the thoughts of your parents, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Did you know that you are the central figure in your mother's nightmares?"

"I'm not surprised." Harry was pulling up strength that he didn't know he had, until the heavy feeling of his magic was barely distinguishable from the feeling of prophecy in the air.

"But don't you care about it?" Dumbledore twinkled at him now, but it was as false as the shine off leprechaun gold. "You could still change her mind, Harry. Go to her and show her how great and noble you truly are. We could heal her mind, together."

"I don't care about my parents anymore," Harry told him, and heard his voice come out as calm and flat as a glacier. He'd taken his magic away from the semi-permanent Levitation Charm around him; he wasn't likely to need it right now. Spread and spread and spread, and his magic had overwhelmed the feeling of prophecy. Harry nodded. He was nearly there. He'd nearly gathered enough strength to do what he wanted to do.

Dumbledore sighed. "I hoped I would not have to do this, Harry. I hoped even now you would see that the good of the wizarding world is little served by making me into your enemy. There is still Tom to fight."

"Both of you are my enemies," said Harry, and envisioned a smooth, icy, bottomless pit.

Dumbledore attacked.

Harry had expected it. The attack overwhelmed him, throwing him back into Draco, and he'd also expected that. Dumbledore was stronger than he was, after all. Where Harry's power could feel like

boulders falling from a ceiling, Dumbledore's could feel like the whole Ministry coming down on their heads.

That didn't matter, not when Harry's magic seized it and funneled it straight past Harry, swallowing it harmlessly. This was not the snake Harry had used to constrain his gift at other points in the past. Instead, he was opening the pit he'd envisioned wider than the snake's mouth could ever go, and he wanted to drain all of Dumbledore's magic, not just the small amount he'd spend in attacking an enemy.

It was working. His power absorbed his enemy's power into itself, and it didn't touch him or Draco. Harry held Dumbledore's eyes, totally without pity, and waited for him to catch on.

Dumbledore's eyes widened, and then he launched such an avalanche of magic that Harry staggered, falling to one knee. But still he went on draining, his goal clear in his mind: Dumbledore a Muggle or a Squib, the way that Harry had never willingly made anyone but Lily.

The avalanche tumbled past him and into the icy pit, too.

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed. Harry felt him gather himself, reaching for old and familiar weapons, calling them, readying them, pointing them straight at his enemy. Harry raised his head and waited. He'd had a dim idea of what would happen from the moment he felt the prophecy in motion, and if he was right, then he could resist the attack.

If he was right.

But then, if he wasn't, no one else had a chance of facing Dumbledore, either, so he would succumb knowing he'd done the best he could.

The compulsion sank home into his mind like a knife, and it was simpler than Harry had thought it would be.

"Be what we trained you to be," Dumbledore whispered to him. "Be what you were for the ten years before you came to Hogwarts."

Harry felt his own mind surrounding the compulsion, aiding it in its persuasion. After all, wasn't that what he wanted? To be the obedient trained little puppet that Lily would have made him, safe to lurk in the background and lead no wars? In the shadows, he was responsible for no one but his brother. He didn't have to make hard decisions. It was not part of a war effort against him when Voldemort and Bellatrix took Durmstrang, but of the effort against his brother and the side of the Light. He hadn't needed to question; other people told him what to do and he did it. And other people didn't bother with trying to know or love him. It had been a shadowy paradise, the one he'd instinctively sought when Voldemort's curse had trapped him in his own mind on the day of the autumn equinox, the one his Complete Vanishing spell had mimicked when he'd known he might destroy Margaret in his anger.

Harry swayed. The compulsion could overbear him, not because Dumbledore was still that strong magically, but because it had assistance from his training and his own desires. Why not surrender? The compulsion made it sound so tempting, and once he was under it, Harry wouldn't know the difference between being forced to choose it and choosing it, anyway. He could have everything he wanted with just a bit of effort.

Everything would be so simple.

And Harry lowered his head and pushed back. Because nothing was simple, nothing was easy, and he knew that.

The knowledge had been bred in his bones and blood from the time he'd learned about the phoenix web—no, maybe from the time he'd begun to accept himself as part of Slytherin House—no, maybe from the time he realized that, no matter what he did, Draco was his friend. The moment the training had come in contact with the real world outside the isolation wards of Godric's Hollow, it had shattered. He was not that fragile, and he had grown around it and survived and lived and thrived, and he had made hard decisions, and no matter what he tried to think, these obligations would never release him, because those who wanted the power to change the world had to be prepared to bear the costs of changing the world.

He pushed and he pushed and he pushed, and he willed the compulsion to break, and it did, shattering into small flying shards.

Harry shook his head and stood. Yes, the prophecy had been right. He did have a kind of power the Dark Lord knew not. Dumbledore had never understood free will. He understood webs, and compulsion, and manipulation, but he did not understand the free choice to do something. He still thought, even now, that he could press a single button, tug a single string, and Harry would go back under control.

Harry felt his first coloring of pity for the man since this had begun, staining the clear dome of his anger, but he kept right on pulling Dumbledore's magic down into his pit. He did it with his eyes fastened on Dumbledore's, though that meant he had to see what happened to his face as he made him into a Squib, because Dumbledore deserved a witness to his agony, and Harry had chosen to be that witness. He felt the hand on his right shoulder clasp tight, and suspected that Draco was watching, as well, though perhaps more with vindictive glee than pity or anger or love.

Yes, love. I see now that I can't just love everyone without distinction and expect it to work out. Snape told me, but I didn't listen to him. Loving people so much that I hesitate to punish them can mean they escape to wreak harm on others that I love. How many people in the Ministry are suffering under Dumbledore's spell right now? How many wouldn't have had to suffer if I'd agreed to punishment for him long ago, when whatever happened to change his mind about Dark Arts hadn't happened?

It was a regret, but Harry didn't think he felt guilt. He saw, now. He saw what needed to happen, and he was prepared to do it.

At the same time, he saw what he was doing, what kind of step he was choosing, sacrificing one life for the good of others. His mouth tightened. It was no wonder that Vera, and Snape, and others, had said that he needed to see himself clearly. It wasn't just so that he could be vates. It was so that he didn't end up like Dumbledore. He had reacted violently against his own impulse to compel Connor at the trial, but that had been a conscious and aberrant thought. What

would happen if he slipped into making other people do things unconsciously? He might never notice. And the people who loved and followed him might never notice, either. And if an enemy rose against him, would he treat him like Dumbledore had treated both Voldemort and Harry?

Not that Voldemort is right. But it's not as simple as right and wrong. It never was. I told Lily once that neither Dumbledore nor Voldemort had learned that lesson, and Dumbledore really hasn't. He must have thought that inflicting mental torture on the people around him was right, because he was the one doing it. He would never have done it just to rejoice in their pain.

So more compassion crept into his mind, but that didn't mean that it crept into his method of dealing with Dumbledore. Harry kept draining him. He knew what it meant, where it was going, and he accepted it.

Draco's hand tightened on his shoulder, and Harry leaned his head back towards him without glancing away from Dumbledore. "What is it, Draco?"

"I—aren't you finished yet?" Draco whispered. "Surely you must have taken all his magic by now. He just looks like an old man."

Harry nodded. He did. Dumbledore's robes didn't shine the way they had when he was Headmaster of Hogwarts, but hung limply on him. He no longer looked intimidating. His eyes wandered, and his breath came slow, and his hands were palsied. If Harry could have believed that Dumbledore would give up now that he had no more active magic, he would have stopped there.

But Dumbledore managed to look up and focus his eyes. Harry saw that steely spark of determination, that conviction of his own righteousness, and shook his head.

"Which is it?" Draco asked, sounding confused. "Yes or no?"

"He still has passive magic," Harry murmured, "the kind of thing that lets wizards live longer than most Muggles. He'll find a way to use that, Draco, if I leave it to him. I can't."

“But if you take it—” said Draco, and fell silent.

“Yes,” agreed Harry.

Draco looped his arms around his waist then, and Harry reached out. Albus could feel himself shaking. It both came and did not come from the fact that most of his magic was gone now. It came mostly from the doom that clanged in his mind like a knell.

He had felt the prophecy in the air, but dismissed it. Sybill could have made another prophecy while he was in prison, and of course he wouldn't have heard of it. That was probably the prophecy that was coming true now. None of the other prophecies fit this particular situation.

And then he'd realized that Malfoy was standing at Harry's right shoulder, and that Malfoy was older than Harry.

No.

That was the first tone of the bell in his mind, the first toll that indicated he might have been wrong. Albus wanted to step away, but his eyes were on Harry's as the boy drained his magic, and he found that he couldn't move unless Harry did. Wide and green and utterly merciless, those eyes looked at him, and they pinned him more effectively than any compulsion.

The prophecy surged and sang like foam on a shore as his magic drained away. The great force that guided the future was happy, as if Albus's loss of his magic, his defeat, could actually help a Seer's vision come true.

It does.

The second tone of doom, and Albus shuddered. He could hardly bear to think what this meant. He was not a Dark Lord. He could not be a Dark Lord. He had always served the Light, even when it took

his magic. He'd never Declared for the Dark. How could he be what Tom was, enough that he'd taken his place in the prophecy?

But even more, how could the prophecy be wrong? Albus had based and built his actions for the last fifteen years around that version of the future. He'd known that they'd have to sacrifice Lily's boys from the time they were born at the end of July. He'd accepted that it meant the sacrifice of Peter, and the suppression of Harry's magic, and the absolute firm grip they'd gained—thought they'd gained—over the boy's mind. Someone born as the seventh month died, the younger of two, having the power the Dark Lord knew not—

Then Albus felt his heart swell. No, this couldn't be the prophecy coming true, could it? It couldn't! He hadn't given Connor his heart-shaped scar, and he hadn't inflicted a curse scar on Harry like Tom had. Besides, he was stronger than Harry, not equal to him in power. There was no way the prophecy could be talking about him.

Yes, it could.

The third sound of the bell rang through him, and Albus shuddered, as he remembered that Tom was also stronger than Harry, and perhaps "marking him as his equal" didn't mean what they'd all thought, and neither did "marking his heart." There was the phoenix web Albus had cast. That had marked Harry's mind, and he had certainly done it out of fear of Harry's magic, out of fear of what Harry would do and become when he grew up, just the way that Tom had ended up marking Harry's forehead out of fear of what the boy might do to oppose him when he grew up—

See how right this is? the bell of doom asked him.

Albus screamed. There seemed to be no air left in his lungs to make the sound, but he made it inside his head, and that was more than enough. The sound of his mistake was everywhere around him, ringing through his bones, making them crumble, making them tear and part and shred, his skin crumple and fall in on him, his heart labor and stop, as he realized that he'd been wrong, wrong—wrong! sang the bell—and created a waste and a mess in trying to fulfill a prophecy that had always been meant to claim him, that had

descended on the one who had tried to save it like some great beast, that had recoiled on the hand that meant to wield it like an ungrateful whip, that was shredding the world into smaller and smaller pieces as he saw how unnecessary all the sacrifices had been.

It was almost a mercy when his heart stopped beating. It stopped the endless flight of the arrows of pain through him, the endless clanging of the bell in his mind.

Harry closed his eyes. It was done, and he didn't need to witness any more. He had swallowed every bit of passive magic that Dumbledore had, including the magic that had kept his heart beating for a hundred and fifty years, when it would have stopped much earlier if he was a Muggle.

He had anticipated what would happen when he did—or, he thought he had. It had still been horrible to watch magically delayed time snap back and take its vengeance, finding a Muggle body that should have aged and been dead and buried long since. Dumbledore's skin had fallen off, his organs had withered to dust, his eyesockets had turned empty, and his robes had become an elaborate shroud around a set of bones. Harry swallowed. Dumbledore was dead now, and it was done.

Well, almost done. Harry didn't really know what to do with the trapped magic, part of him and yet not part of him, churning at the bottom of the icy pit. Dumbledore's magic didn't taste quite as vicious and tainted as the magic the Death Eaters and Voldemort used, but it was slimy and greasy, like the film of the spell that had covered Harry's skin even in Hogwarts. He didn't want to swallow the magic. He didn't want it mixing with his own power, because it was mightier, and could overwhelm him like a greater quantity of poison overwhelming pure water.

Images flashed behind his eyes as he thought of a way to deal with it: the sea or the earth, which could swallow it, and the graveyard where Voldemort had told him about that particular power of earth, and the white light that had funneled from Augustus's staff as he broke through Voldemort's wards—

That's it.

He opened his eyes and turned to Draco. "Can I borrow your tie?" he asked. "I didn't put mine on before I went to the library."

Draco blinked, as if he had forgotten that there was such a thing as Slytherin school ties, and then undid his and handed it to him. Harry took it up and turned it around. A simple thing, green and silver, and made of cloth that was ridiculously fragile. He murmured a few preservation spells and sent the magic funneling through his gripping fingers, to make it strong enough.

Then he took up Dumbledore's captured magic and poured it into the tie.

The magic didn't want to go. It fought and twisted and rebounded back on itself, warping and coming up with cunning ways to slip away from him. Harry had the advantage, though, since he had trapped the power already, and the visualization of ice he'd used to contain it didn't have any holes or handholds to let it get out. In the end, it went where he told it to and poured into the tie.

When he opened his eyes, Draco's tie was glowing like the sun. After a moment, though, the magic settled into its new home and lost the sentience that it had grown under pressure. Harry let out a soft breath and stuffed the tie into a pocket of his robe.

"What are you going to do with that?" Draco asked in a high voice.

"I'd like to wrap it around a rock and throw it into the Atlantic, but somehow I don't think that would be safe enough," Harry muttered, and then blinked as he realized it wasn't Draco who'd spoken. He turned around, and found that the corridor was crowded with those people who'd been under Dumbledore's spell, silently staring at them. Harry flushed. Merlin knows how long they've been awake, or how much they saw, or what they think about it all.

He lifted his chin and tried to get back some semblance of dignity. "I'll have to talk to Minister Scrimgeour, of course," he said as coolly as

he could. “Is there someone who can direct me to his office from here?”

Several people volunteered at once to be guides, from a woman clad in the robes of an Auror trainee to a man with multiple quills behind his ear who appeared to work in the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Harry caught mostly sidelong glances from them all, their eyes round and wide to the point of looking as if they hurt. They might have been awed, or frightened, or dreaming of getting free drinks from this story for a month.

Harry shook his head. I’ll be charged with murder, for all I know. I don’t think there are precedents for things like this.

He was more occupied, though, with trying to figure out why the prophecy had happened now as their merry little band trudged towards the lifts. Did that mean it didn’t apply to the defeat of Voldemort after all? Then why in the world had so many other things relating to Voldemort fit—the curse scar that he bore, for instance, and the fact that he and Connor had been born twins, appearing to fit the prophecy neatly?

Except that that wasn’t the only prophecy I’ve heard lately. Was it.

Harry had to half-close his eyes, but Acies’s whispering recital came back to him.

“Three on three the old one coils,
Three in its times, three in its choices,
It bears his rivals to silence and stillness,
And the wild Darkness laughs, and the Light rejoices.”

Harry hadn’t wondered what “the old one” was, so caught up had he been in the implications of the second quatrain and its storms. Now, he wondered if this prophecy was referring to an older prophecy—such as the one Trelawney had made sixteen, maybe even seventeen, years ago.

Can prophecies come true more than once? I don’t know. It’s something to ask Acies.

A more urgent concern tackled him as their little group at last reached the level of Scrimgeour's office.

If I'm right, that means it'll come true twice more. Who, besides Voldemort, do we have to face?

Chapter Sixty: Wake and Find It So

Rufus came back to himself suddenly. One moment he was learning a dozen new variations of Crucio under Lucius Malfoy's wand—he hadn't known the pain could be lifted and lowered like a flame, nor concentrated in one part of his body until he almost screamed for mercy—and the next he sprawled on the floor of his office, taking short, desperate breaths, the memory of phantom pain lifting like a miasma from his limbs. For long moments, he could only blink and touch his chest. His heart was laboring intensely, but it had not yet given up. Rufus would have hoped so. He would hate to think that a simple heart attack could kill him at any time in his life, especially now, when he was just hitting his stride as Minister.

Then he realized that it had been a spell, and it had ended, and that there were few wizards in the Ministry powerful enough to cast Capto Horrifer. On the other hand, that the spell had ended indicated that there might not be as much urgency in dealing with this as he had thought.

He sat up, deliberately not rushing, and headed over to Percy Weasley. The young man lay on his back, cheeks white as icing, and breathed frantically. Rufus yelled in his ear. That produced no results. Rufus nodded, and then slapped him hard across the face.

Percy started up with a gasp and a cry, narrowing missing hitting the Minister in the nose with his head. Then he leaned back and took deep gasps of air, and murmured, "What happened, sir?"

"Capto Horrifer." At Percy's blank look, Rufus rolled his eyes and elaborated. "A Dark spell that makes us relive the memories that terrified us most, but keeps on twisting and elaborating them until we don't know what's going to happen next. Some wizards go mad and commit suicide from the terror alone. It takes a lot of strength. Unless the wizard who cast this is right outside our door, the only ones who could have done this are You-Know-Who or Albus Dumbledore." He stood up, slowly, and grimaced as he felt how his bad leg ached. That wasn't a phantom pain. "I suggest, Weasley, that you brush up on your Dark spells as well as the laws and edicts."

Percy blushed, restoring some of the living color to his face, and Rufus heard him mutter something that sounded like, "The rules are important."

He'll never be an Auror until he loses that attitude. Rufus concealed a sigh. "So is surviving the curse coming at you," he snapped, and then stumped over and opened the office door.

Tonks leaned against the wall, her breath shallow but her eyes sane. She nodded at him. "Minister," she said. That was when Rufus noted the other signs. She was white around the lips, and her hair was pure white, like a unicorn. He knew the truth before she spoke it. "I—Dawlish is dead, sir. I've been up and down the hallway a little, to see if I could help anyone or find out who did this, and he was sprawled on the floor with his wand to his own temple."

Rufus grimaced. He wondered what memory a strong and self-assured Auror like Dawlish could have had to entice him to commit suicide, and then was glad he would never find out. "Thank you, Auror Tonks. Be on your guard, and pass the message to the others. I think, though, since the spell has stopped burning, that the crisis is past. Perhaps we'll find that there's been a successful Death Eater raid, or that the wizard who cast this is dead. That's the most likely reason for a Capto Horripher to end." He entertained a pleasant fantasy, for a moment, of what would happen if You-Know-Who was dead, but then dismissed it. That was fantasy, and he had to live in reality.

Tonks nodded at him, and Rufus retreated to his office. He could trust Tonks to tell who needed to be told about the ending of the spell. In the meantime, the last thing the wizarding world needed its Minister to do was wander around the Ministry poking into every corner. If Rufus could be absolutely assured that the spell was at an end and his people were ready to see him, he'd do it, but he couldn't, and there had been cases of those newly released from a Capto Horripher spell casting curses at whoever moved. He'd wait until he knew the extent of the danger.

In the meantime, he used this period to pause and recover. He sat down behind his desk and began sternly asking himself the Five Questions that Aurors come back after a battle in which they'd

encountered a mind-twisting spell were always asked. He could hear Weasley droning them to himself, too, and was mildly impressed that he'd reached that phase in his training.

How do you know that this world is real?

By the feel of solid objects under his hands. That had always been Rufus's answer. He rapped his desk, and it gave back both a satisfying sound under his knuckles and a pressing bruise.

How do you know that what you saw was only a dream?

Rufus snorted wryly. Because I'm damn sure that Lucius Malfoy is working with Harry now. If he wasn't, if he were still running around in a Death Eater cloak and mask, Rufus would be on the hunt already.

How do you know that you are ready to return to the field?

Stupid question, that one, really, since Rufus did spend most of his time behind a desk now, but it could be adapted. He was ready to continue the work of the Ministry because he'd come out of the spell prepared, having recognized its nature, and sane, which was more than could be said for some people. Needs must, and he could.

How will you learn to recover from this spell?

The same way he always did, of course: distracting himself with paperwork, and talking to Grandmother Leonora's portrait about it. If there was a more sensible and rock-solid woman on the earth, Rufus didn't know about it.

Are you sure that you do not need a healer from St. Mungo's to aid you in your recovery?

After one disastrous experience that involved a powerful illusionist, two cats, and green goo, Rufus and the healers from St. Mungo's had made an agreement: they would only treat him for purely physical wounds, and he wouldn't hex them. The Five Questions had become Four Questions for him most of the time he was a field Auror. Rufus sighed and opened his eyes.

And then came the anger. Someone had cast the Capto Horrifer in the Ministry itself. If it was You-Know-Who, then Rufus was mostly angry at the ward-keepers who somehow hadn't managed to stop him from Apparating in and doing that. One expected that kind of mind-twisting spell from him, after all.

If it was Albus Dumbledore...

Rufus wasn't sure whom he was more angry at in that case, Dumbledore or himself. He had had indications that Hestia Jones had visited the man. He'd arranged for extra security on his cell in Tullianum, but obviously, he should have done more. Some other Order of the Phoenix member had probably found and freed him.

Of course, would Dumbledore cast a spell like this? Rufus found himself doubting that. Yes, the man was a child abuser, but it wasn't his kind of method. Even when he had his freedom and the means to choose any spell he liked, he'd still chosen a subtle compulsion spell that wouldn't automatically implicate him, that would have, if things had worked out in his favor, not even been noticeable as a spell. Capto Horrifer seemed too crude for him, and too direct.

He could only wait for news from below, he supposed.

Then Tonks flung open the door, took one excited step forward, somehow tripped on her robe, spun around twice, and slammed into his desk. Rufus leaped forward, first to catch her, and then, since he couldn't, to catch his inkwell before it could spill all over his paperwork. He shook his head when Tonks popped up immediately, not seeming fazed over her mishap.

"Sir! Sir, they said it was Dumbledore, and that he's dead, and that Harry Pot—I mean, Harry is on his way up!" Tonks was beaming, her hands working together. "They're saying that Harry killed him, sir!"

Rufus blinked, once, twice. Strong as Harry was, he'd known that Dumbledore was stronger, and he found himself wondering how Harry had managed this. Obviously, certain things had happened that he didn't know about yet.

“Send him in when he comes,” he said, and then sat behind his desk and tried to look composed.

Draco noticed, even if Harry didn't. Harry was prone to ignoring things like that, and right now his green eyes looked shuttered, gazing inward. He was probably dealing with matters of life and death and morality and how this had happened and whether he had done the right thing in killing the former Headmaster, Draco knew.

Whereas Draco spent their journey to Scrimgeour's office noticing the things that were truly important. The deference in the glances that their escorts gave Harry, for example. The idiot would probably think it was fear, if he bothered to look at them at all, but these people had been in the hallway where Harry—and Draco, too—destroyed Dumbledore. They had seen what he was doing, seen the expression on his face, seen that he wasn't some Dark Lord exulting in the task but an executioner mourning the necessity while never letting the necessity turn him away. Harry hadn't turned these people, at least, into creeping, cringing toads the way he might have thought he had. He had inspired them. They knew what their freedom and sanity had cost, and they were grateful for it. Harry had the core of more allies here, or friends, or sycophants, depending on how he played his cards.

Of course, the git wouldn't play his cards. He'd assume they were afraid, or he would refuse to acknowledge thanks as something he deserved. Draco decided that he couldn't let that happen, not when Harry had put down such beautiful and fertile soil.

He dropped behind Harry a little, until he walked next to the young woman in the robes of an Auror trainee. She studied him thoughtfully. Draco realized that she'd probably recognized his features—if not as those of a Malfoy, certainly a pureblood—and he inclined his head in a suitably regal nod.

“You know what he did?” he whispered, nodding forward to Harry.

The woman nodded back, her bright eyes implying that she enjoyed the game, and knew why he was whispering.

“He had some help, of course,” said Draco, anxious to establish that. “I came and rescued him. But once I freed him from the spell, he did what he did on his own. He defeated the man who’d imprisoned and mentally tortured everyone in the Ministry. And he won’t see it that way. He’ll see it as a killing. Could you help insure that that doesn’t become the general cast of thought in the Ministry?”

The young woman nodded. “I could. It would fulfill the debt I owe him. I was about to kill myself when the spell split. And then I watched everything that happened. I know what he did. It’s best not to confront him with it if he’d balk, perhaps, but just to have people ready and waiting if he does need them, hmmm?”

Draco nodded at her, impressed. “You’re quick. I like that.”

The woman smiled. “I was at his parents’ trial. I’ve admired him since then. And now this, to owe him a debt personally, and to do something besides the endless drills they put us through in Auror training—it’s heartening. I’ll move slowly at first, because I mostly have connections and not outright power right now, but I’ll do what I can to build him some allies here.”

Draco beamed at her, and then drew in a few other people who had noticed they were talking. The rest continued staring worshipfully at Harry. That was all right, Draco thought. Those would be the dancers who did anything Harry wanted. There had to be some. He was setting the music to a dance that would benefit Harry, but with its participants knowing that sometimes their leader was self-deluded, and other times didn’t even expect other people to acknowledge what he’d done.

It’s not going behind his back, Draco defended himself against the slight sting of his conscience. It’s being practical about the politics. That’s what Harry has to learn: that you actually have to ask people to do things, not just assume they’ll see what you believe in and fall into line. I’ll teach him whenever he asks, and to do that, I need to have some examples ready.

And if he had the beginnings of his own dance, it wouldn't hurt, Draco had to admit. He was growing increasingly frustrated with the tone of his father's letters, and increasingly wary of the confrontation he knew was coming with Lucius. Having people who looked at him with admiration could help him practically, and help him with his self-confidence when he at last had no choice but to face the old dragon in his den.

Harry let out a grunt he hadn't known he was capable of when he stepped into the Minister's office and saw both Scrimgeour and Percy alive and well. Certainly, if Scrimgeour had died under Dumbledore's spell, then they would have heard the message before they got this far, but there was nothing like seeing it with his own eyes.

"Sir," he said, nodding to the Minister.

"Harry," said Scrimgeour. "Malfoy." His voice on Draco's last name had a distinctly cool tone, but he nodded to him, and pointed his wand, murmuring a modified Summoning Charm. Two chairs skidded out from the wall and into the center of the office. "Have a seat." He eyed the crowd of people who had followed them like ducklings and added, "The rest of you will have to wait outside."

Amid much grumbling, and pokes from Tonks's wand, they did so. Harry was glad when the office door shut and he was alone with only two people who stared at him avidly. The gazes on their way upstairs had been bad enough. Harry had met a few of them, and didn't know what they wanted. He was puzzled by the lack of horror behind their eyes, too. Dumbledore had died in a stomach-turning way. Didn't that matter to them? To any of them?

"Tell me what happened," said Scrimgeour.

Harry took a deep breath and began describing the incident from the time he'd first noticed the burning of Dark magic to the south. When he reached the falling of Hogwarts's wards, he interrupted himself to exclaim, "Sir! Shouldn't we reach the Headmistress, and ask her—"

"She contacted me, actually, a few minutes ago," said Scrimgeour with a faint smile, nodding to the fireplace in a corner of his office.

“She said that she’d stabilized the wards for now. It rather looks as if they’ll have to be renewed each morning—there’s a structural weakness in them that she and the Deputy Headmaster can’t pinpoint yet—but she can manage that.”

Harry nodded, not reassured. Renewed each morning? Does that mean they’ll weaken during the night? That is not good news.

“I told them about you,” Scrimgeour added. “I’d received word from Tonks by then about what you’d done, though I want to hear the full story from you, of course. I think Professor Snape might have come through the flames to find you, but the Headmistress said she needed his help with the wards yet.”

Harry sighed with relief. That’s one confrontation postponed.

“You were about to tell me the rest of it?” Scrimgeour prompted.

Harry nodded, and took up his recitation again, scrimping on detail from the graveyard memory. He had to hand the narration over to Draco at that point, though, since he had no idea what had happened outside his head between the time he’d been caught and the time he’d awakened.

Draco lifted his head, all sleek pride and Slytherin cunning. “I have a bracelet that lets me know when Harry’s in danger, sir,” he said, displaying it. “I also have a family heirloom that let me make a wish to be transported to Harry’s side. When I arrived, I found that, thanks to the heirloom’s effects, I was immune to the Capto Horrifer spell.” Scrimgeour looked as if he would have very much liked to interrupt, but Draco went on, irresistible as the sweep of Professor Snape’s robes. “I entered Dumbledore’s mind and possessed his body.”

Harry blinked. He hadn’t expected Draco to reveal that gift, not when they’d worked so hard to keep it secret, and Draco had refused, in the wake of Midwinter, to tell even his parents.

“You can do that?” Scrimgeour’s voice was flat.

Draco inclined his head.

“And you did not let anyone know?”

“It’s an important advantage in battle, sir.” Draco raised his eyebrows. Harry had never heard his voice so perfectly composed. “I would not want word of it reaching Harry’s enemies too soon. And since I intend to be at his side for each and every one of his battles, I’ll be wielding it against those enemies. I trust you will understand the importance of that, and keep mum on the subject when we have left your office.” Harry choked; Draco had just managed to compliment the Minister’s discretion and insult his intelligence in the same sentence. “Should I have come to you the moment I learned about it and proclaimed it to the wizarding world? No, I think not. Harry has been training me. He trusts me to control his body.” Draco gave Harry a look that Harry was rather embarrassed to let Scrimgeour see. “And if he trusts me, to do that and to stand at his back, I rather think you should.”

Scrimgeour was silent for a long moment. Harry could see warring impulses in his face. One might have gone by the name of admiration for a good verbal duelist, and one looked as if it would prompt Scrimgeour to say damn Malfoys.

Instead, Scrimgeour just nodded, and then said, “I will not tell anyone now. If I find that it has been used to commit crimes, Mr. Malfoy, or interfere in the Ministry, you will find Aurors arresting you so fast your head will spin. Continue with your story.”

Draco nodded. “I possessed Dumbledore, but he is—was—a Legilimens, and he knew how to fight back and defend his own mind. He struck at me, but I felt the attack coming. I possessed the magic that he was using to attack me.”

“Is that even possible?” Harry asked in wonder. All their experiments so far had been with embodied possession. Harry had thought that Draco was strictly confined to the use of limbs, and, once freed from them, as he was in the passage between his mind and another person’s, he would be disoriented.

“It is,” said Draco. “Because I did it.”

Harry looked at him, sitting polished and proud on the chair beside him, and had to sit on his own sudden impulse. One did not snog one's boyfriend in front of the Minister, no matter how tempting he was.

"All right," he said. "Go on."

"I imagined that Dumbledore's magic was a wand, and I was the magic passing through the core," Draco said casually. "A visualization that my father taught me." Scrimgeour frowned, and Harry realized that Draco had been watching for that, and had mentioned his father on purpose. Draco seemed satisfied with whatever he'd got out of the Minister, and went on. "Then I did the same thing to myself, and created a spell that would wake Harry up."

Harry had to interrupt again. "On the fly."

Draco looked at him, a faint half-smile playing around the corners of his mouth. "Yes."

"With nothing but will and need and magic."

"I rather thought I just said that," Draco retorted haughtily. Then he paused. "Perhaps I didn't, at that," he admitted. "But, yes. That's what I did."

Harry shook his head, half-helpless with admiration. Draco bowed and extended his hand, his way of giving the story back to Harry. Harry finished with what he'd done to Dumbledore, still sneaking glances at Draco every now and then. But he turned sober again when he had to face Scrimgeour and ask, "Does that mean I'm charged with murder, sir?"

Scrimgeour snorted. "Of course not."

Harry blinked. "But, sir—"

"You destroyed a wizard who was mentally torturing my people," Scrimgeour interrupted, "including, no doubt, members of the Wizengamot who were in the building. He killed some of them. I don't

know the full casualty list yet, but it includes at least one distinguished Auror.” Pain darted across Scrimgeour’s face like a flash of lightning. “On top of this, he’d already been arrested for child abuse charges, and he would have had the charges added for the compulsion spell he used when he was tried, and he’d wronged your friend Peter Pettigrew, and from the way you describe the battle, he was doing his best to kill you then. We could convene the Wizengamot, I suppose, Harry, but you can tell me what verdict they would reach, and they would most likely regard it as a waste of their time.”

“But I killed someone else,” Harry said. “There has to be some recompense for that, doesn’t there?”

“If you want to think of it that way,” said Scrimgeour, “then Dumbledore’s death was the recompense for the people he killed and sacrificed.”

Harry nodded slowly. He could adapt to the idea, he supposed. It still felt odd, unnatural, a tight constriction on his skin, and he no more liked what he’d done to Dumbledore than he liked what he’d done to Greyback. But maybe, as long as he could do what was necessary and still keep his humanity, he wouldn’t walk down the path Dumbledore had trod, justifying each death and pain as for the good of others.

I hope.

“Now,” Scrimgeour said, drawing his attention again, “I’ll pass the relevant aspects of the story onto my people.” He gave Draco a glance. “I’ll do it in such a way, Mr. Malfoy, that you are a hero and yet your possession abilities are not touched on. I’m sure that’s the way you wanted it.”

Sarcasm choked Scrimgeour’s voice like ivy, but Draco merely bowed his head. “Thank you, sir,” he said. “You’ve phrased it wonderfully.”

Scrimgeour shook his head. “I’ll also take care of arranging for the mental healing of my people,” he said, turning back to Harry. “I’ve handled Capto Horrifer victims before, and been through the spell myself. It’ll take some of them a while to heal, and some never will,

and others, like Tonks, are already back to normal. I don't need your help here, Harry."

Harry blinked. "I—this feels rather as if you're shoving me away, sir," he said.

Scrimgeour laughed. "That's because I am, Harry. I want you to go home. You don't have to worry about murder charges. You've done your part in ending Dumbledore's magic, and the spell with it. You don't have to worry about the mental healing of all the people in the Ministry. You wouldn't be good at it, anyway, because you'd have to devote a lot of hours to just one person, and you'd also worry and fret over all the other people who were going unhealed in the meantime. It isn't your responsibility to get them back to normal. Go home."

Harry nodded, slowly, and stood up. Draco came to his side at once, and took his arm. "Tired?" he asked.

"A bit," Harry muttered, and then sighed. "Can we use your fireplace, sir?"

"Be my guests." Scrimgeour sat back in interest and watched as they cast the Floo powder into the flames and called for the Headmistress's office. Just before they stepped through the green fire, however, Scrimgeour called, "And Harry?"

Harry glanced over his shoulder. He was startled to see Scrimgeour completing a sweeping bow, the kind of gesture that pureblood wizards used to offer to the graves of fallen friends.

"Well fought," said Scrimgeour softly. "Thank you."

Harry nodded, throat tight in a new way, and stepped into the flames. He whirled through the Floo Network faster than he could remember going before—or maybe that was just his mingled anticipation and dread of their return—and barely stepped out of the way in time as Draco came surging through behind him. Draco snatched him around the waist again, not seeming to mind at all.

McGonagall rose from behind her desk to welcome them. Harry stared when he realized that two shadowy figures stood at her side, one a wizard and one a witch. The wizard smiled at them. The witch frowned, and fingered the silver clasp that held her long dark hair in place as if she were considering whether or not they still belonged in Hogwarts.

“Harry, Draco Malfoy,” said McGonagall, stumbling just a little on Harry’s lack of a last name, “may I introduce Godric Gryffindor and Rowena Ravenclaw? Or the specters of them, at least. They are bound to anchor-stones in Hogwarts, assisting the current Headmistress or Headmaster with her or his decisions. Currently, that’s maintaining the wards.” She grimaced. “I assume that Albus had something to do with them falling? It is like him.”

Harry nodded, caught between bowing to the two Founders and answering the Headmistress’s questions. He wound up making the gesture first, and then saying, “Yes, Madam. Dumbledore dropped the wards to keep you here and distract you, I think. He was attacking the Ministry with Capto Horrifer.” McGonagall’s face turned pale. “And—I’m sorry, Madam, but he’s dead. Dumbledore, I mean. I drained his magic completely and killed him.”

“Ah,” said the shade of Rowena Ravenclaw. She had a voice as sharp as the beak of her House’s eagle, and Harry winced, imagining what it must have been like for her students. Her dark eyes pierced him. “You are an absorbere, then. Interesting. I have not met a magic-swallower for some time.”

“I am,” said Harry. “I didn’t know there was a name for it, though.”

“There is a name for everything—” Rowena began, in the tones of someone who’d had to explain this before.

“Leave the boy be, Rowena.” Godric laid a restraining hand on her arm, his eyes bright as he gazed at Harry. “He’s been through a lot. Is what you said true, Harry? Is Albus really dead?”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

"Don't be." Godric sighed. "He should have died a long time ago, really, when he first started going bad. It's better to perish while one is still noble, because then the death means more." He sounded as if he were quoting. "And he wound the wards around himself," he added, in a completely different tone, one of disgust. "I can't believe he would do that. No Headmaster has ever been so careless with the school's safety."

"No Headmaster has ever believed he was right as implacably as that one," Rowena snapped back, wrapping her waterfall of dark hair around her hands. "I told you that when we first met him."

"And then you trusted him, Rowena. All three of us did." Godric grinned. "Besides, I think one Headmistress did think she was as right as he did." He shot Rowena a sly glance and waited.

The Ravenclaw Founder began to splutter. McGonagall interrupted to say, "I'll thank you for the full tale later, Harry, but for now the wards are secure and you look like you're about to collapse. Take care of him, Mr. Malfoy."

"I will, Headmistress."

Harry wondered in outrage when he'd acquired so many caretakers, but it was true that all his expended effort was rushing on him at last, and he wobbled as they stood on the moving staircase. Draco wrapped an arm around him. Harry yawned. "I think I'll be all right with a bit of sleep," he said.

Snape was waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs. Harry stared hard into his eyes, and encountered nothing there of the anger he'd expected.

"I believe that you would not have left under your own power, Harry," he said. "We've had discussions about that."

Harry swallowed. "That's true," he said.

Snape turned, glittering-eyed, on Draco. "Mr. Malfoy, on the other hand, has no excuse for not informing me of his whereabouts."

Draco gulped. Harry leaned on the wall, and grinned, and prepared to enjoy someone else getting scolded for adventures for once.

Odd. Very odd.

Falco perched on the roof of the Owlery, still in his sea eagle form, to contemplate all he'd learned. He preened his feathers, always a good mindless activity, while his mind made its lists.

He'd arrived at the Ministry quickly, of course, and felt the pressure of both Albus's magic and another's. That would be the Harry Potter Albus had told him about, Falco guessed; he was dimly aware that the shard of himself he'd left floating on the surface of his mind, a sentry against disasters, had received and answered letters from Albus a few times in the last few years. Most recently, it had given him advice on spreading his compulsion like a mist and ensnaring this Harry he was so worried about.

But Albus hadn't said the boy was anything like this.

Falco had watched, his eyes grown sharp enough to pierce stone when he wanted them to, as Harry fought Albus. He'd drained his magic with control and precision, something that made Falco think well of him. He hadn't hesitated when he went for the kill, which was also a good trait, in moderation. He appeared to ponder on the morality of his actions, if the pensive expression on his face was any indication. Also good, at least when one was young and not enough above the false moralities of the world to see them all for what they were.

Falco was not yet sure what to do about him. This Harry seemed to be a Lord-level wizard he and magic could live with, on the surface. He hadn't Declared for Dark or Light, and he seemed to have no intention of doing so.

But.

But.

Now that the sentry shard of his mind was reunited with the rest, Falco recalled what Albus had said about this Harry being vates. That was simply impossible. Falco himself had tried and failed to walk the vates path when he was younger, multiple times. And if he could not do it, not even when he was four hundred years old and had the necessary wisdom and experience if anyone did, then how could a child do so? No, he was probably breaking webs and freeing magical creatures without a thought of the consequences more than one or two decades in the future. He had to think longer than that, though. Many magical creatures lived for centuries, and some were immortal, and wizards themselves lived longer than Muggles.

Besides, Falco understood something about being vates that no other wizard or witch who had tried to walk that thorny path did. The vates must achieve what he did without violating even his own will. That was impossible, for when the vates grew impatient and wanted to achieve his goals at the expense of others, and held himself back from doing so, he would frustrate his will. The moment Falco had understood that, he had turned away from that impossible task and never looked back. It was enough work, Merlin knew, trying to balance magic and insure that it was safe from its own inherent self-destructive tendencies.

So. This Harry was a careless child, who just happened to be an absorbere, and sometimes capable of balance, and sometimes swinging wildly like an errant compass needle. Falco would continue to watch him, and judge him, and judge the efforts of the man who called himself Voldemort, and see where and when his own efforts to preserve the balance should fall. At the moment, he rather thought he would have to work against both sides, frustrating Voldemort's efforts at world domination and Harry's careless snapping of bonds that existed for a reason.

No one else understands as much about balance as I do, Falco thought in resignation, spreading his wings so that he could detour to the north and look at Voldemort's camp. And sometimes it grows lonely.

Intermission: Ring the Changes

There should only be two blossoms on that branch.

Indigena paused to wipe sweat out of her eyes. She was in her largest greenhouse at Thornhall, her home for the past thirty years, which she hadn't seen in two months with the way her Lord kept her at his beck and call. The house elves had done well in tending the plants, but her absence had somehow made Indigena forget both the profusion of greenery and the heat inside the place.

She hadn't forgotten the way the plants should look, though, and Grandmother Tourmaline's bell-bush was a matter of special importance. Tourmaline Yaxley had invented the plant as a kind of early warning system. The center of the bush was a mass of hybrid branches, each of them carefully cultivated from a native tree or shrub of every place in the world that had a wizarding community; it had taken most of Tourmaline's life, and a lot of letter-writing, to get hold of them all. Bred together, they created a bundle of distinctive branches, one for each community. But the flowers were all the same, small and delicate bells with a clapper-shaped center that never stopped moving, even without the wind, and created delicate ringing sounds audible throughout most of the greenhouse.

The blossoms showed the presence of Lord-level wizards, and thus of Lords or Ladies, in each wizarding community. In Tourmaline's lifetime, the blossoms had been black for Dark Lords and white for Light Lords. Indigena had found that boring, so she'd changed it to deep green for Dark and gold for Light. Those were ancient and symbolic colors, too; Indigena still remembered reading about the Wars of Green and Gold, somewhere back in the dim mists of European wizarding history just after Merlin, when a Dark Lady and a Light Lady wearing those respective colors had contended against each other. And they made the bell-bush more pleasing to look at.

The bush was not thickly clustered; there were currently thirty-three Lord-level wizards in the whole of the world. Most of the blossoms were golden. Dark wizards might predominate in many other wizarding communities, but they weren't stupid. Light Lords were more likely to retreat into their dreams, while Dark Lords were more

likely to blow up their houses. Thus they kept a rather stricter watch on Lord-level wizards than Britain tended to, and nipped the problems in the bud. The Australian branch was unusual in bearing two blossoms right now, one dark green and one golden, but those were two Lords so evenly matched in power and in hatred that they quarreled only with each other—no one else was a worthy competitor—and left the rest of the world alone.

The British branch had had a dark green blossom and a golden one for forty years. Then, fourteen years ago, another blossom had appeared and insisted, to Indigena's annoyance, on slowly becoming dark green stained with gold, like summer leaves in sunlight. She'd searched, to justify her curiosity, but had heard no rumors of another Lord-level wizard. Then the flower had withered into a blackened nub three years after it appeared, and Indigena had begun to suspect that Grandmother Tourmaline's breeding wasn't so flawless after that.

Well, of course she had been in the wrong, and the bush had been in the right, as she'd figured out when the green-gold bell had burst back into bloom overnight in the early summer nearly three years ago. Rumors had reached her, then, of a Lord-level child suddenly emerged into his power. Indigena had confirmed that Harry Potter's parents had been hiding him away—the reason she couldn't find him in the first place—and a bit more poking revealed the news about his bound magic, confirmed by the trial. His flower had died because he hadn't had the magic to act like a Lord, for a while. Mystery solved, Indigena had happily accepted her answers and gone about her gardening. She hadn't imagined then that it would ever be a matter of more than intellectual curiosity to her.

Now, it was rather more than a matter of intellectual curiosity to her, to note that the British branch had one dark green flower—Lord Voldemort's—Harry's green-gold one, and a new blossom, which was apparently attempting to be neither gold nor green and wound up looking rather sick, instead. The golden one had withered.

Indigena bit her lip thoughtfully and stepped forward. Her Lord would want to know about this. He knew about the loss of Dumbledore's magic, but a new Lord or Lady come into play would be entirely

unexpected, and very much unwelcome. Indigena's hand hovered over the new flower.

There was a test she could perform to determine the new Lord's name and nature, but it would involve plucking his flower, and thus losing the ability to determine if his allegiance changed. Once picked, the blossom would never grow again. The bell-bush, and not just Harry's flower, was temperamental that way.

Indigena decided the loss of the future information was worth it. They needed information now. She plucked the blossom, and carried it back inside Thornhall, so that she could work with it.

Indigena sat beside the fire in her study and lifted a glass of mulled wine to herself. She thought she deserved it. She'd been clever and loyal, and, in being clever and loyal, secured a task that suited her very well.

Casting the flower into a bowl of pure water and speaking the incantation that Grandmother Tourmaline had recorded in her private journals over it had given her a name and a face. Falco Parkinson, the name was, and he had a long fall of silver hair and intense green eyes. Indigena had searched for information on him, and been surprised to find several books that recorded his deaths—his different deaths. The authors all claimed that the others were lying, of course, or hadn't done their research correctly, but Indigena was thinking now that this could be the work of a Lord-level illusionist, who'd withdrawn from the world for a while. He'd been able to fool Grandmother Tourmaline's bush, too.

He must have taken an active interest in the wizarding world again. That was the report Indigena had given her Dark Lord that night.

And Lord Voldemort had been alarmed, and assigned her at once to the task of obstructing Falco's purposes and making his life as difficult and dangerous as possible, without actually helping Harry.

Indigena had thought a moment, and proposed a way to do that. Her Lord took some convincing to agree. After all, while it fulfilled his

conditions, it put Indigena's own spin on them, and Lord Voldemort had a hatred for others' creativity tainting his fine plans.

But, in the end, he had agreed.

Indigena knew it would take some time. But it would use the skills she considered most important, her cleverness and her ability to breed plants, and it kept her from having to participate in torture and killing, which frankly bored her. Well, there would be that one boring but necessary outing in the middle of February; Indigena had to agree that her Lord would need her on that one.

She'd wished, at first, that the Dark Lord had sent her to Durmstrang instead of Bellatrix. She would have enjoyed the challenge of keeping all the students as hostages and keeping anyone from getting into the school, as well as the rest from the blood and the gore. But now she was glad it hadn't happened.

She was already imagining the look on both Falco's face and Harry's when her schemes finally played out.

Indigena drank her wine and laughed out loud. I love it when I can show off my intelligence.

Chapter Sixty-One: Follow Me Into Night

Harry opened his eyes and sighed. Well, that was anticlimactic.

He had finally managed to separate the parts of his own mind from Draco's over the mental connection they shared, more than a week after the death of Dumbledore. He'd felt his own palms sweating as he lay down and swished through the grass of the Occlumency connection in the direction of Voldemort's mind. Then he'd waited to dream. When he'd gone hunting Voldemort earlier in the year, he'd leaped directly into the middle of the tunnel, and the Dark Lord had been able to control their battle. This time, Harry thought, if he just sat still, the vision would probably snatch him up as it had in the past when he was already sleeping.

And he'd fallen asleep, and dreamt of Voldemort and Indigena Yaxley in a large house, but they had discussed nothing interesting. The movement of supplies to Bellatrix in Durmstrang, the bribery of high-placed Ministry officials—conveniently omitting names—the last names of a few minor Dark pureblood families who might be swayed into becoming Voldemort's adherents. Nothing new, nothing exciting, nothing daring. Harry knew that was probably only coincidence, because Voldemort would have attacked him if he had known he was there, but still—

I hoped it would go better, my first night back.

Harry waited to go back to sleep, and waited, and waited. Every sound seemed to jostle and press him out of the slumber he drifted towards. Draco's snores, light though they were, made his eyes snap open. Blaise muttered and shifted in his bed, and it startled Harry as much as a knife suddenly pressed to his ribs. He curled closer to Argutus, who slept in a warm ball on his pillow, but the snake made a little hissing sound of complaint, and that went home like a curse.

Harry shook his head and sat up, then listened for some noise of Draco or Blaise stirring. Neither did. Harry relaxed and slipped carefully out of his bed and towards the door. Fawkes wasn't here—he had to catch his breath for a moment as sorrow swept over him—

and so there was neither light nor song to alert the other boys. Harry padded out of the room and slipped the door shut behind him.

The Slytherin common room was empty except for one sixth-year boy who always seemed to fall asleep there and never woke unless someone shook his shoulder like wind shaking the Whomping Willow. Harry could sit on one of the couches and gaze into the fire and not be troubled.

He found that he couldn't, though. The sixth-year snored lustily. Harry felt his teeth set further and further on edge, and he sighed, shifting restlessly. Finally, after one snore that included a snort on the end, Harry stood and made his way to the door of the common room. Perhaps a touch of cold dungeon air was just what he needed to clear his head. It was too late for Snape to still be awake, almost midnight, or Harry would have gone to his private rooms and asked to sleep there.

He paused an inch from the door. Something is wrong.

He tried to dismiss it as the product of an overactive imagination; he couldn't sleep, and he was tired and cranky and ready to seek a magical explanation for it when he was just too much awake. But then the idea pressed insistently against his brain, and Harry realized that he could feel a large gathering of magic off to one side of the school. It felt like Cremo, or one of the other great fire spells. There were some that burned hot enough to melt stone, and if this one had come this far, then the wards weren't taking care of it.

The wards weaken at night, Harry remembered.

Harry flung the door to the common room open, thinking that he should find Headmistress McGonagall, assuming she didn't already know, and trying distractedly to feel where the spell was burning. The opposite side of the school, he thought, one of the Towers. He would go and help to quench the fire—

Then the darkness unfolded itself in front of him, and Evan Rosier dropped his Disillusionment Charm and stepped forward.

"If there were dreams to sell," he murmured, "what would you buy? Some cost a passing bell, some a light sigh." He aimed his wand at Harry's throat. "If there were dreams to sell, merry and sad to tell, and the crier rang the bell, what would you buy?"

"I don't have time for this right now," said Harry, moving forward a step so that the door to the Slytherin common room shut behind him. He was grateful that Snape had personally strengthened the wards on the dungeons. Unless Rosier had hung about long enough to hear the password, he was unlikely to be able to enter. "There's a fire."

Rosier smiled at him. "I know. I set it."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"I've come to sell you a dream, Harry," said Rosier. "But you were staying in that snug common room, and even the Insomnia Charm I used just for you wasn't working." He pouted at Harry. "So, the fire. It gets people busy so that they aren't looking for you, and I knew it would bring you out."

"I wouldn't trust you to sell me a treacle tart, Rosier." Harry fixed his eyes on the passageway beyond him. He could use a blast of magic that would spin Rosier into the wall, knock him out, and bind him. He started to build it. "And I'm going to help with the fire now, thank you."

"I thought you might be like that," said Rosier. "Some people are simply too ungrateful, even when all they've ever wanted is about to come true." He reached behind him, into the corner where he'd been standing, and tugged something else under a Disillusionment Charm to his side. "So I brought someone else to talk to you about buying your dream."

He dropped the Charm with a flourish. Hermione, pale and silent, stood in front of him, shivering when Rosier moved his hand to touch the silver collar around her neck. Harry froze, recognizing it.

"Isn't this a pretty thing for the naughty girl I caught sneaking down to visit her boyfriend?" Rosier crooned. He nodded seriously at Harry. "And of course you know what this pretty thing can do, since you

used one of them to kill Mulciber last year. I've modified it a bit, you know. It'll explode on my command. A nonverbal spell, just a twitch of a thought. Or it'll explode in an hour from the time I first offered you your dream. And you've already used two minutes of that." He smiled at Harry. "Will you buy your dream now?"

Harry did his best not to remember Mulciber's death, the shards of silver that had sliced open his throat. If the same thing happened to Hermione, he could not live with his guilt. He kept his eyes fixed on Rosier's face. "You haven't said what this marvelous thing is that you're offering me."

Rosier applauded silently above Hermione's head. "You do pay attention when you want to," he said. "Excellent. 'Marvelous thing' is an excellent description for this dream, Harry. You should have been a poet yourself. You would have ended more happily than the poet selling dreams did, you know. Tried to cut off his own leg and then finally poisoned himself. Poor, miserable man. He really couldn't stand being a Squib."

"Tell me what it is, Rosier," Harry said, seeing the way Hermione's eyes widened, knowing another minute had passed, and now trying not to think about her in Rosier's hands for an hour or more.

"A way into Durmstrang," said Rosier.

Harry stared at him.

"You saved my life in the graveyard," said the older wizard, with a sigh, as if Harry were rather dim. "I don't like it, but there you are. And I still have some friends among the Death Eaters. I've told you that before. I've acquired a Portkey that will take us inside the school with disturbing the lightning ward. There, I rather think we should be able to kill Bella, and even have some fun with her before we do. Wouldn't you like to do that, Harry? I know that you're a saint sometimes, but you're human, too. You must want revenge on her for what she did to your hand. A dream come true, like I said."

Harry laughed in desperation. The sound bubbled out of his throat in a way that made Hermione's eyes widen, and he forced himself to stop. Four minutes wasted. At least.

He took a deep breath and shook his head. "Why in the world should I trust you, Rosier?" he asked. "For all I know, that Portkey might take me anywhere, and I've never thought you would be someone to honor a life debt. This isn't a dream."

"Thus my naughty little girl here." Rosier began stroking his fingers through Hermione's hair. He'd put his wand away in his pocket at some point, which Harry didn't remember passing. "To make sure that you do. If you don't follow me, then I kill her, Harry. Not to mention that all those children in Durmstrang keep suffering under Bella. I've heard that she's ordering them to fuck each other now. Do you really want to be responsible for that?"

Harry hesitated, shivering. Rosier swept all of Hermione's hair away from her neck and bent to place a kiss on the silver collar, crooning, "Sweet and sweet is their poisoned note, the little snakes of silver throat, in mossy skulls that nest and lie, ever singing, 'Die, oh! die.'"

It was the way Hermione stood very still as Rosier's lips passed near her skin that decided Harry. He burst out, "Fine! I'll come with you to Durmstrang. Just leave her alone."

Rosier smiled at him and let Hermione go with a shove at him, so that Harry had to catch her. He did, and spent a long moment looking into her eyes, trying to smile in reassurance. Hermione did her best to smile back, but her eyes shut, and she huddled against Harry as if trying to erase the memory of what Rosier had done to her.

"It'll be all right," Harry whispered to her. "I promise, it'll be all right."

"So long as we're back in fifty minutes," said Rosier brightly. Harry looked up to see him holding a smooth, flat white stone that was probably the Portkey. "And be a good girl, Hermione, and don't tell anyone what that collar around your neck does. I can feel it vibrating if you speak."

Hermione nodded, her eyes still tightly shut, her face as pale as parchment.

“Good girl,” said Rosier tenderly, and then motioned to Harry.

Harry took a few steps forward and reached out to grasp the stone, knowing as he did so that he was betraying other people. Snape had trusted him not to leave without permission, and now he was doing that. McGonagall could use his help to contain Rosier’s fire, and now he wouldn’t be here to help. Charles and Thomas and his other allies had assumed he would leave the Durmstrang problem up to those who had the time and leisure to do the research. Draco would be infuriated that Harry had left the common room at all when the wards were weak.

But he looked again at Hermione in the moment before his hand closed on the pebble, and he knew that he would do the same thing again—for any of his friends or allies caught in the same predicament, really. No one deserved what Hermione must have lived through in the past hour, what she was still suffering with the delicate touch of the silver collar around her throat.

His hand closed on the stone. Rosier cried out, “Portus!”

The world around Harry dissolved into patches of green and black and white as the Portkey sprang to life. He felt a moment’s wonder that it actually was a Portkey and not some magical weapon designed to kill him, and then he had to wonder, of course, if they would actually get where Rosier claimed they were going.

They did, or they appeared to. The Portkey deposited them into a small stone room that looked like a closet to Harry, from the brooms and mops in the corners. And it was cold. He shivered as the ice seemed to cut through him, and wind, though of course they were shut off from the open air. He looked at Rosier. “Is it all right to cast a Warming Charm?” he whispered.

Rosier, who was looking out the door of the closet, shrugged. “So long as you make it wandless. Bella would feel any magic cast with a wand right now.”

Harry cast the charm, and immediately felt better. "You don't look cold," he observed, as he came up beside Rosier, for the lack of something better to say.

He could only see half Rosier's profile, since the man was busy peering up and down the hall, but he made out the smile. "When you've hung on thorns intent on eating your heart for two months," said Rosier softly, "cold doesn't seem to really matter anymore, and neither does hunger, and neither does sorrow. Poetry does," he added, as if he thought he should clarify that for Harry. "But poetry always matters."

Harry shuddered. In other words, Yaxley's torture made him even more insane. Well, Harry would have been surprised if it hadn't been so.

"This direction," Rosier said abruptly, and wrenched the closet door open. Harry jumped at the sound, but walked briskly behind him as they headed towards a great space of light and warmth. How long did Hermione have? Forty-five minutes? If they were lucky, Harry thought.

They halted in the shadows just outside what Harry knew must be Durmstrang's Great Hall, and Rosier gripped his shoulder, holding him still. Harry fought not to just tear the hand off him; it would make too much noise. "There," Rosier whispered. "There she is. I don't know what object she'll have attached Ariadne's Web to, but it won't be too far away."

"Object?" Harry whispered, wondering, once again, if this had been wise. Perhaps Rosier really only had brought him here to fuck with his mind. But, once again, what could he have done?

Rosier nodded at him. "Ariadne's Web can't be broken from the inside," he murmured. "And she can cause death or pain to anyone in it with the twitch of a thought. From the inside, it really does look just like a single, smooth, seamless web, the way a spider's web appears to a fly trapped inside it. But from the outside, you can see that it's attached to some object in the caster's possession. We have to find out what that is and destroy it. Otherwise, you can shred the web, but

she'll just reestablish it by linking the threads back to the object, like a spider using the same chair leg to weave its web as before."

"Would killing her work?" Harry asked quietly.

Rosier nodded. "It would, but we still have to identify the object. That's the weak point, the one where you begin shredding it."

Anyone else, Harry thought, would have told me that in reverse order to the way Rosier did. But given everything else he had to be irritated or frightened about, this was a very minor complaint. He took a deep breath, and turned his gaze fully into the Great Hall, which he hadn't dared do before.

It didn't resemble Hogwarts's Great Hall. The ceiling was lower, and not enchanted. The walls held carvings in the stone instead of banners, showing what Harry assumed was a series of battles; he couldn't tell that much about them from his angle, which was low on the wall, around a corner, and in the southwestern portion of the hall. A pile of cloth in the corner said that tapestries might once have hung here, but Bellatrix had removed them. A single large, round wooden table stood in the center of the room, with children sitting stiffly around it.

On a dais at the head of the hall was Bellatrix, sitting on a dark throne, wrapped in furs, and laughing. "Go on," she said to two people on the floor in front of the dais, gesturing with her right hand. "Go on."

Harry looked at the people she was talking to. They looked tall, sixth-year or seventh-year students probably, but from this distance Harry couldn't tell if they were boys or girls; the bundled furs they wore made it hard to be sure. They moved towards each other and tentatively kissed, shivering in a way that had nothing to do with cold, while Bellatrix laughed and laughed.

Harry closed his eyes tightly. He had thought that Rosier's words about Bellatrix making the students fuck was exaggeration on his part, but it seemed they weren't.

"Forty minutes until Hermione dies," said Rosier helpfully.

Harry nodded, and wasn't sure whom he was nodding to. "She won't sense wandless magic?" he whispered. "Are you absolutely sure of that?"

Rosier nodded. "She didn't sense your charm, did she?"

Harry smiled. It felt grim even to him, and whatever it looked like to Rosier, it appeared to delight him. "Then I'll get up on the dais and look for whatever object she's hooked the web to. *Extabesco plene*," he added, and the spell he'd invented for completely hiding from people arose and enwrapped him. It still felt a bit odd to stride into the middle of the hall with it, but no one glanced at him.

As he got closer, he could see better. The two students Bellatrix was forcing to kiss were a tall girl with an unhappy, pale face, and Charles's son Owen. Harry swallowed a breath of protest and moved forward again, staring intently at the dais. It could be the throne of black rock Bellatrix sat in, or one of the furs wound richly about her, but he didn't think so. Neither vibrated with magic. It was probably some object hidden under the thick white and sable furs, instead.

"Now," Bellatrix announced, "take your clothes off."

Harry felt his shoulders jerk as if someone had pulled on a string attached to them. Owen turned and looked up at Bellatrix, never making a sound. A moment later, though, he did, as he fell down. His right leg was obviously broken, with no more than the slightest twitch from Bellatrix.

"I promise," Bella said, when she had finished laughing at Owen's pain, "you won't feel the cold when you get going. Since it appears that you'll have to lie down on top of him, just do it now." She nodded briskly to the girl who'd been kissing Owen. The girl knelt at once, though Harry could see the tremors racing in her limbs and knew how badly she must want to defy the older witch.

Harry imagined days on days of this, trapped in the school with a madwoman, knowing she could cause you pain or death with the

slightest whim, never knowing if rescue was coming, having hope die day by day—

He shook his head and stepped forward, mounting the last step of the dais. Bellatrix looked straight through him, of course. Harry looked hard at her, trying to see any faint strands of a web that might connect to her, trying desperately not to let the sounds from behind influence him.

Nothing, nothing, nothing. The furs wrapped close around Bellatrix's feet and legs, not leaving much room for an object to sit on the floor underneath them. Perhaps something rested in the chair next to her, but Harry couldn't see it, if so; both throne and furs lapped her to the point of making her look like one of the fat queens from centuries ago. Harry stepped up right behind her, reminding himself that no one could sense him, and stared down at Bellatrix's lap, wondering if the object rested there.

No. Not with her. On her.

Harry saw the faint blue lines racing to and away from her right hand, the hand that had once been his before Bellatrix transformed it, and nodded once. That was it, then. Bellatrix had insured that no one could steal the object from her easily, or Voldemort had insured it. Of course they had. They were quite clever, in their own mad, limited way.

He took a deep breath. He would need to drop his hiding spell before he could use the spell he intended to use, since all his magic was currently trapped under the shield with him. And that meant he would appear right next to Bellatrix for at least a moment, and Merlin knew what she might do.

He told himself to be quick, to get on with it. One, two, three—

“Why, hello, Bella.”

Harry froze as Rosier strolled into the hall and stood on the far side of the wooden table, smiling disarmingly up at the dais. Bellatrix looked

up from Owen and the girl, and her eyes shone like marble. Then she cackled.

“Evan,” she purred. “Come home to the flock, did you? Or did you only come to watch my little games?”

“Only the latter, I’m afraid, Bella.” Rosier bowed to her, sounding sorrowful. “Because, as the poet says, dear and dear is the poisoned note—”

“Oh, don’t bore me with your poets, Evan,” Bellatrix snapped, and wriggled her thumb. Harry saw a girl at the table lurch upright, choking. “You know I don’t like them. And don’t get any closer to me, or you’ll be the cause of at least one girl’s death.” She nodded to the child she was choking.

Rosier laughed. “Do you think I care, Bella?” he asked, drawing his wand. “Who insured that the children were alive as they hung outside Ottery St. Catchpole, after all, and that it took so long to get them down?”

Harry shook his head. The information that Rosier had been responsible for the Children’s Massacre in the First War was indeed startling, but he couldn’t let Rosier control his actions. A girl was choking. Owen lay on the floor with a broken leg. Regardless of what Rosier had in mind, or didn’t, Harry knew he had to strike now.

He dropped his Complete Vanishing spell. Bellatrix sensed the rush of magic, or perhaps only the sudden presence of someone beside her where no one had been before, and turned her head to stare at him.

Harry didn’t wait. “Sectumsemptra!”

And as if it had been a year before, as if she didn’t know what she was doing, Bellatrix lurched backward from the curse with a scream, and lifted her right arm to defend her chest and face, and the spell neatly sliced her right hand off at the wrist. The hand soared across the dais, spinning and sending blood up and down in obscene

pinwheels, but Harry had been waiting for that. “Accio hand!” he called, and the grotesque thing turned and flew straight back to him.

He held it close for a moment, looking at it. There was no sign that it had once been his hand, and sat on the end of his left wrist. Bellatrix had changed not only the direction of the fingers, but the complexion of the skin and its size, so that it fit on her own arm. Harry found that he didn’t feel much as he held it. Resentment, of course, but far more resentment of the way she had treated the children in Durmstrang. He shook his head and began to gather his magic.

“You’ll never destroy it, Potter!”

Harry looked up. Bellatrix, covered in blood, bits of bone sticking out of her right wrist, handless now—and, Harry could also clearly see now that the furs had fallen away, with her breasts gone—was laughing at him like a maddened werewolf. She shook her head, back and forth, back and forth.

“It was yours! You’ll want to retain it, keep it, charm it around and put it back on your wrist!” She leaned forward, as if conveying a great secret. “You could, you know,” she whispered. “It would be easier than finding out what curses I used on your arm and removing them all. There are curses under curses, Potter, traps under traps.”

It took Harry a moment to realize what she was saying, and then he stared. Had that really been why Voldemort and Bellatrix chose to link the Ariadne’s Web to her right hand? Because it had been his, and they thought he could never bring himself to destroy it?

“You don’t know me at all,” Harry whispered, and spoke the spell aloud, just because he could, not because he had to. “Concremo!”

The fire burst from his right hand, augmented by a blue tinge that Harry thought came from the phoenix fire he still hadn’t learned to control, spreading up and down his palm and fringing it in flames. They ate Bellatrix’s hand from the inside, turning the fingers to blacked bones and then to ashes, boiling the blood, withering the skin and then eating it entirely. The blue lines of Ariadne’s Web leading from it puffed into nonexistence. Harry stepped back, casting a

Levitation Charm, and the hand hovered in midair, burning, so that everyone could see it. Bellatrix watched with a gaping mouth. Most of the children were either uncomprehending or taking large breaths as they seemed to realize the web that had held them was being destroyed. Rosier laughed aloud.

When the fire finished, then Bellatrix began to scream, hysterical, mindless cries that made Harry wrinkle his nose. The very last of her sanity was gone now, he knew. He thought about capturing her and taking her along. He could give her to the Ministry. Under Veritaserum, she could tell them much about Voldemort's plans. And with the object she'd linked the web to destroyed, she wasn't about to reestablish it.

Rosier cast the Severing Curse. Harry swung around, ready to deflect it if it was aimed at him or one of the children, but it struck past him and laid Bellatrix open from breastbone to ankles. The way she screamed then was something Harry knew he would hear in his nightmares for the rest of his life, and the furs lost their black and white color under the flood of gore from her body.

"Finish her, Harry!" Rosier called out, his voice high and tight with excitement.

Harry swallowed his revulsion. He had no choice; Rosier might strike at one of the Durmstrang children if he didn't, and Bellatrix was otherwise condemned to a slow death. He could use the Killing Curse, but he had no wish to use the Unforgivable in front of a castle of children who had already experienced enough.

He locked his eyes with Bellatrix's and willed her dead, pressing against the parts of her brain that kept her alive with Legilimency. Bellatrix wavered for a moment—using Legilimency on someone insane was incredibly hard, as Snape had taught him—but then her eyes closed, and she sighed, and the screaming stopped. Harry had to turn away. He was afraid he would be ill if he kept staring at her body.

"Well done, Harry!"

Harry glanced at the middle of the Great Hall to see Rosier leaping up and down excitedly and clapping his hands together. The children just stared from around him, their eyes tired and dead and unable to believe they were free.

Harry swallowed. "It's going to be all right," he said, and the same reassurance he had given Hermione rang hollow, even to him. "I—" He shook his head. None of the lies he could speak to them now were at all inspiring. He turned and glanced at Owen, who was fighting his way back to his feet. "Can you cast that communication spell and tell your father that Durmstrang is free now?" He reached out to the lightning ward that surrounded the school and pulled powerfully at it. It shredded easily; they were simple to take down from the inside, as many books had said unhelpfully, maddeningly, to him.

"I can," said Owen steadily. Another boy who looked almost exactly like him came up behind him and supported his head and shoulders; Harry knew it must be his twin brother Michael. A word over Owen's broken leg, and the pain in his face eased. Harry glanced along the table, and found the girl Bellatrix had choked being stroked and soothed by other students.

"Good," said Harry, and turned back to Rosier. "We have to go back to Hogwarts. I want to make sure that you free Hermione."

"Would I do something else?" Rosier asked, and then he laughed and bowed. "Forgive me, Harry. Of course I would. And since you killed Bellatrix so sweetly, doing what I asked of you like an aimed weapon, then of course I will free Hermione." He held up the white stone, and Harry strode forward and gripped it.

They started to whirl out just as other people Apparated into the hall. Harry caught a glimpse of Charles's startled face, and could only shrug before the Portkey took him. Charles, with other parents, must have been watching for the moment the lightning ward fell. At least they were here now, and could comfort their children.

He and Rosier landed roughly in the hall outside the Slytherin common room, and Harry found Hermione standing utterly still, the

silver collar still in place around her neck. Rosier strode forward and stood stroking it for a moment.

“Take it off,” Harry said. “Now.”

Rosier clucked his tongue at him. “I hardly think that you’re in any position to be so impatient, Harry. I could still destroy her with a thought.” But he drew the silver collar slowly off Hermione’s neck, his fingers lingering on her skin. Hermione turned her face away and trembled, then swallowed several times. Rosier laughed.

“The next time I see you,” Harry said to his back, “I’m going to kill you.”

Rosier glanced at him over his shoulder, eyes tranquil. “I know,” he said. “But that’s all right. My life debt is fulfilled. I won’t ever come near you with as little protection again. Oh, and Harry?”

Harry stood still, wondering if it wouldn’t be the best course to kill Rosier now, and ready to do so if he made the least motion towards Hermione.

“Tell Henrietta Bulstrode to watch her back.” Rosier smiled at him, and Apparated out, proving once and for all to Harry how weak a state the Hogwarts wards were in. The moment he was gone, Hermione swayed as if she might collapse.

Harry moved forward to gather her in his arms, closing his eyes. He felt helpless. The mental scars Rosier had given Hermione tonight, and the ones that the Durmstrang children had suffered, were beyond his ability to heal or even soothe. Hermione held fast to him and cried frantically, and Harry could be her support, but he wanted to do so much more, and he didn’t think he could.

“Mr.—Harry.”

Harry looked up wearily. Professor McGonagall stood in front of him, her lips thinned to a precise line, and behind her was Snape, voice gone in his rage. Harry looked down. The fire must be under control, or they would never have left it to come looking for me.

He knew he would face more than scolding; he would face anger and bitter disappointment, especially once they knew whom he had gone with. But that would have to happen. Tonight had been poisonous, full of no easy decisions except in the moment that he had shredded Ariadne's Web. Now Harry had to set himself and face the purging of the poison, which promised to be no less painful.

"Yes, Madam?" he asked.

Chapter Sixty-Two: Everybody Yells At Harry

Harry followed obediently enough behind McGonagall and Snape until he realized that they were going to the Headmistress's office. Then he slowed until they looked at him, and nodded at Hermione, still wrapped in the circle of his arms.

"I don't think she should have to hear what you say to me," he said softly. "Can you find someone to escort her back to Gryffindor Tower?"

"I hardly think—" Snape began.

"But I did not, either, and I have to admit, Miss Granger needs attention," said McGonagall, in a much softer voice than she'd used on Harry. "Miss Granger, if you would like me to call Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter? They are both awake, as the fire started burning on the outside of Gryffindor Tower."

Hermione said a word that might have been "please." McGonagall took it that way, at least, and turned away, red wards manifesting around her as she moved. She touched one of them, and a small creature that looked like a lion made of fire leaped away from her, vanishing but trailing a small comet-tail behind it. McGonagall caught Harry's gaze, and explained, "Since I set the wards in Gryffindor Tower when I was still Head of House, I can summon my students who live in that House."

Harry nodded. "Have you figured out the structural weakness in the wards yet, Madam?" he asked.

Whether because of the subject or for Hermione's sake, McGonagall was at least willing to discuss this without yelling at him. Snape looked as if he became more angry with each moment the scolding was delayed, but McGonagall ignored his tight noise of disapproval. "Not yet, Mr.—Harry." She sighed. "The Founders know that the weakness is somewhere in the tunnels of Hogwarts, but the Founders have access to all those tunnels. They know everything that is in them. It is much easier to survey them from an anchor-stone than it is walking through them on foot. And they have searched them all, and

reported no holes to me. It is rather as if the wards are water we pour into soil, and they soak into the soil and vanish.” McGonagall gestured to the red wards glowing around her. “These are strong because I renewed them when I was up in the Tower, but they will start fading again in a few hours’ time. We don’t know what happened, and if Albus was still here, I think I would strangle him before I could get answers out of him.”

Harry smiled in spite of himself. A moment later, footsteps pounded down the corridor, and Connor and Ron appeared in front of them. Their hair was wild—Connor’s almost as wild as Harry’s own—and their faces were covered with soot in which tear tracks of sweat had appeared.

“Hermione!”

“Harry!”

They spoke so nearly in unison that Harry found it difficult to tell who had said what. McGonagall nodded as if both words made sense. “Miss Granger was captured by the wizard who set the fire,” she said. “Please take her back to Gryffindor Tower and make her as comfortable as possible.”

Ron reached out, and Hermione shook herself free of Harry and went to him, burying her face in his neck with a little sob. Harry could understand why. She’d been in Rosier’s company for however long it took the Insomnia Charm to wake Harry up and Rosier to decide to set the fire instead. She needed the soothing of close friends now, and he wasn’t one of them, no matter how he wished to be.

Connor, though he looked at Hermione with an anxious expression, turned back to watching Harry in a moment. “Are you all right?” he whispered.

Harry shrugged. “It’s a snakebite,” he said, which he knew confused Connor, but expressed his feelings on the matter as eloquently as possible. “I’ll recover.”

In a moment, he regretted the metaphor as he found Snape's fingers gripping his arm and turning it. "Where were you bitten?" Snape asked, in a voice that anyone else might have found emotionless. Harry could hear the pounded-down emotions within it, flat flakes of worry and concern and rage.

"I didn't mean it literally," said Harry softly, drawing his arm free. "Just that Rosier's poisoned the whole night with his presence."

"Rosier?" Connor exclaimed. Hermione gave a muffled moan at the sound of his name, and Ron began moving back towards the Tower.

Harry managed a fleeting smile at his brother. "Don't worry. The next time I see him, I'm going to kill him. I told him that."

"You should have done it this time!" Snape all but barked. When Harry looked at him, he could see his face darkening with the onrush of rage.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, please escort Miss Granger to the Tower now," said McGonagall quickly. Connor looked disappointed, but he put his arm around Hermione's free shoulder and started moving with her towards the stairs. McGonagall turned fiercely on Snape in the next moment. "We are not doing this in the hallway, Severus. I agree that we need to talk to Harry, but we'll do it in the privacy of my office. Mr. Malfoy is already waiting there, in any case," she added, with a sidelong glance at Harry.

Harry bowed his head. He could imagine how frantic Draco would be, particularly if he woke from a random dream and found Harry gone.

But underneath the penitence was a growing seed of frustration. What else could he have done? Rosier would have killed Hermione with a thought before Harry could strike him, likely, especially given that Harry didn't have any magic ready or a spell on his lips when he met them. And Hermione's death would have distracted Harry further, perhaps even giving Rosier time to get away.

It was a situation that could only have ended badly for everyone. In another world, Harry supposed, he might have cared little enough

about Hermione to risk her death, but in this one he hadn't. He had made a poisoned decision, but all decisions this night were poisoned. He had thought that the yelling he knew McGonagall and Snape and Draco would do would prove cathartic, at least for them. Now he wondered if anything could purge the venom gathering under his skin.

Snape kept silent, with an obviously supreme effort, until they were riding the moving staircase up to McGonagall's office. Then he said, "I trusted you to tell me before you considered leaving the school, Harry. It seems I was wrong to trust you, at least on that score."

Harry let his eyes unfocus as he tried to count stones in the wall. He had thought it would be easy to submit to this scolding; he'd had so many of them before. But now he found sarcasm burning on his tongue, sharp as the Many's poison. The little snake stirred in his pocket as he thought of her, and Harry knew she would spit in Snape's eyes and blind him if he merely asked. He shook his head. The vision wasn't tempting. He wanted to spit his own words instead.

Snape saw the headshake, and his voice sharpened. "Is this your way of telling me that I should not trust you at all, Harry? Perhaps my first instincts, the ones I had last year, were right, then, and I do need to cast monitoring spells on you. Or perhaps I should use the potions that let parents know the emotional state of their infants at once, as you seem prone to following yours rather than coming and getting an adult, or someone who stands outside the situation and can see rationally."

Harry swallowed, and swallowed again. They didn't know everything yet. They knew about the fire, and that he had gone, and that Hermione had been hurt. Perhaps when they heard every detail, they would understand that rational thought was less than useless in this particular venture.

"Will you tell us what happened, Harry?"

McGonagall was the one who said that, and Harry turned to her gratefully. "Yes," he said softly. "When we get into your office, Headmistress. I think Draco should hear this, too."

She nodded, and then they arrived at the top of the staircase and she opened the door. Harry saw several conjured chairs in the moment before Draco flung himself out of one and threw his arms around Harry.

"I didn't even know," he breathed. "I didn't know where you were. The bracelet said that you were alive and healthy, so Professor Snape convinced me not to use it to go after you."

"He was right," said Harry softly, stepping out of the embrace, glad that Draco was apparently more reasonable than Harry had thought he would be. "I went to Durmstrang."

Draco's face turned the color of ashes. "You what?" he said, and now Harry could see the anger building in him. "But you promised, Harry. You said that you would leave the research on Durmstrang to wizards and witches who could handle it because they were the parents of children there. You took the first chance to free the school that came along, didn't you?"

"I wouldn't call Evan Rosier much of a chance," Harry said. "Certainly not the one I would have chosen."

"Rosier was here?" Draco stared at him as if he were mad.

Harry nodded, and then, seeing a way to deflect anger from him for a while, glanced at McGonagall. "Is the school safe to stay open, Headmistress?" he asked. "If the wards are going to drain every night, I mean."

McGonagall sat down behind her desk, looking very tired. "Yes," she said quietly. "I've described the problem to several ward-builders at the Ministry, and they said it sounds familiar. They're coming tomorrow to strengthen the wards and prevent them from draining. If they couldn't have done anything, then I would have sincerely considered closing Hogwarts, or asking you to construct a lightning ward that included both the school and Hogsmeade."

Harry nodded. "That's how Rosier got in," he said. "Apparating, because the wards are so weak. He set the fire and seized Hermione

when he found her in the halls. He put a collar on her like the one Mulciber wore last year, the one that I exploded when I killed him. He said that hers would trigger at a thought, to kill her.”

“And you believed him?”

Harry turned to stare at Snape as his guardian took one of the chairs. “What do you mean?”

“I investigated those collars last year after Mulciber’s death,” said Snape in a glacial voice. “They are clever, but an inherently inflexible design, one that can only be altered in a number of select ways. They can control thoughts, and block them from outside influences. They will also hurt the victim if removed by force. But only someone with as much magic as you could make one burst, Harry. At most, Rosier might have used that collar to compel Miss Granger to do what he wanted her to do, or encouraged you to free and thus hurt her. And that is all.”

Harry bit his lip. “I didn’t think he was bluffing,” he said. “This was Evan Rosier. He plays riddles and tricks and games, but he doesn’t bluff.” And running a bluff like that would add to the thrill of the game for him, added the darker part of his mind, the one that came closer to understanding Rosier than he would have liked.

“You don’t know that!” Snape roared, and leaned forward. “You didn’t even consider the possibility, though you know he is a liar! You believed him without question! That is what must stop, Harry! This senseless risking of your life on the word of your enemies, as if you trust your enemies more than your friends—“

“Enough, Severus,” McGonagall interrupted. Harry turned to see that she was sitting behind her desk. “I, for one, would like to hear the whole story without interruption. And I suspect that there will be time for scolding later.” She smiled at Harry, but with steel behind the sympathy. “Please sit down, Harry.”

Harry sat down, took a deep breath, and resumed the story. “Rosier said that he’d used an Insomnia Charm to get me out of the common room, but that didn’t work fast enough for his tastes, so he set the fire.

Sure enough, I came rushing out, and he had Hermione with her collar. He claimed that he wanted to pay a life debt he'd incurred when I set him free of Yaxley's thorns in the graveyard and healed him. If I refused, he'd make the collar explode and Hermione die." Harry shuddered convulsively as he remembered the look in Hermione's eyes when Rosier pulled her forward. "I don't know what he'd already done to her. You'll want to talk to her, Headmistress." McGonagall nodded, lips thin.

"He had a Portkey that he'd 'obtained' from loyal Death Eaters; he still has contacts among them. He said it would take us to Durmstrang, behind the lightning ward. And if we took too long, Hermione would also die, because the collar would explode an hour from the moment he offered me the Portkey."

"Even though it could not have," said Snape, contempt in every note of his voice. "Even though you were taking a foolish and suicidal risk in grasping the Portkey of a known madman."

"I agree," said Draco.

"Please, gentlemen," said McGonagall. "Let Harry finish his story."

Harry breathed deeply for a long moment, so that what came out would be the words of that story and not his rage. Then he said, "I thought I had no choice. I agreed, and we did indeed go to Durmstrang."

"Coincidence," Snape muttered. "Not a sign that you could trust him."

Harry found that his fingers hurt, and looked down. He was vaguely surprised to see them gripping the side of his chair so hard the knuckles had turned white. He swallowed and continued. "Bellatrix had an object that Ariadne's Web linked to. It turned out to be her right hand. I was going to cut it off, but Rosier revealed himself and taunted Bellatrix into injuring a girl before I could. So I had to reveal myself and cut it off then. Bellatrix thought I wouldn't destroy it because it had been my hand." He saw Draco pale from the corner of his eye. "I did burn it, though, and the web was gone. Then Rosier used a Severing Curse on Bellatrix, and I killed her; she was mad and

in pain. I couldn't stay long to reassure the children at Durmstrang. I was afraid Hermione's collar would explode any moment and kill her. We came back here, and Rosier kept his word to remove the collar and leave." Harry stirred uneasily, remembering his last words. "He also made a threat against Henrietta Bulstrode."

"Mrs. Bulstrode should prove tougher prey than he thinks," McGonagall murmured. Harry nodded, remembering the way McGonagall had watched Henrietta at their meetings in the Room of Requirement.

"But I still want to warn her," he added.

"That can come later." Snape had got control of his voice now, and it was only furiously quiet instead of furiously loud. It sounded more like a whip that way, though, and Harry flinched as he listened. "First, Harry, I want you to explain what you thought you were doing."

"Saving Hermione's life," said Harry, as distinctly as he could amid the conflicting impulses to lower his eyes and just listen, and the one to defend himself.

"Even though the collar was fake," Snape said.

"Yes."

"And would you have given your life for any student like that?" Snape sneered. "I had thought that your circle of senseless sacrifices had grown smaller, so that we only had to worry about the safety of a certain number of people as connected to you. Or am I wrong? Would you sacrifice your life to save an Augurey chick hatched yesterday?"

Harry took a deep breath. "No one deserves to suffer at Evan Rosier's hands," he said. "And what he asked for wasn't a hostage exchange, or to kill me instead of her. He wanted something within my power. So, yes, I did it."

"You did not answer my question." Snape's face was now white to the lips. "Any student? The Augurey chick?"

“The Augurey chick, I don’t know,” said Harry softly. “Any student?” He considered his response. Snape wasn’t going to like it. On the other hand, Snape was also staring into his eyes and would know if he lied. “Yes.”

Snape leaned forward like a viper. Harry found himself shrinking back in his chair. He hadn’t known Snape could move so fast. “That is what we must heal,” Snape snarled. “That is what you must give up. You know what importance your life holds to those around you, Harry. And if you will not think of that—if you cannot think of that when your enemies are threatening other students with nonexistent magic—then think of your importance to the war effort and the prophecy. You told me that you believe the way you and Draco defeated Dumbledore was only the first iteration of the prophecy, that two more are to come. And who do you think will stand before those Dark Lords if you are dead?”

“He didn’t want to kill me, I said,” Harry forced out between his teeth, clamping down on the urge to say something unforgivable. “I had an excellent chance of surviving the evening.”

“You didn’t know that.” Snape’s voice only got lower and more intense. “He could have taken you to Voldemort with that Portkey, or dropped you down a bottomless pit. You had no way of knowing, and still you gripped that Portkey. You do seem to trust your enemies better than your friends.”

Harry closed his eyes, mostly to keep Snape from seeing his anger. “It has nothing to do with that, sir, and everything to do with making the best decision I could under impossible circumstances,” he said quietly.

“And why did you not simply kill Rosier?” Snape asked. “You could have done that, Harry, the moment you saw him. Then you would have spared Miss Granger’s life and secured your own safety.”

“And forfeited the chance to save the children at Durmstrang.”

“You can’t use that as an argument, Harry,” Draco said from his other side. “You admitted that you didn’t know what Rosier was going to do

with that Portkey, and you had no way to be sure that he was telling the truth. So you can't say that the way it turned out was for the best. You didn't know how it would turn out then."

Harry had to admit that. "All right," he said. "But you know very well why I didn't kill him. I don't just—I don't just kill people."

"And that is an attitude you will need to lose around Rosier," said Snape.

"I did say that I would kill him the next time I met him," Harry protested.

"But you didn't kill him before he Apparated away," Draco said. "He's alive to make trouble for you in the future."

Harry ran his hand through his hair, and suppressed the impulse to spring up and pace, mostly because he was sure McGonagall wouldn't like it. He looked at the Headmistress, whose face was hard in that way that made it impossible to guess what kind of homework or detentions she would assign next. "What do you think of this, Madam?" he asked her.

McGonagall nodded a little, as if she'd been waiting for someone to ask her her opinion. "I think that you did the best you could under very hard circumstances, Harry," she said. "But you need to think of the future. And you need to take precautions that will satisfy your guardian and your—" She shook her head as if all the words she could use to describe Draco's relationship with him were too undignified for her to utter. "I'm not sure what those will be. But I encourage you to take them." She stood. "And if I'm not mistaken, more visitors are arriving now, perhaps to see that you are back, or perhaps because they know that Durmstrang is free."

She stepped forward and opened the door to her office before anyone could knock. Narcissa Malfoy looked startled for half a second, before she gave a stiff nod to McGonagall. McGonagall nodded back even more stiffly, as if the fate of the world depended on the way she bent her neck. Harry knew the two women didn't like each other, but he'd rarely seen it so clearly expressed.

Narcissa swept into the room, and focused on Harry. Harry was gratified to see an expression of relief cross her face for a moment, as if she hadn't been sure she would find Harry alive and well until she saw him. But then her features cooled, and she swept forward and held her left arm out to Harry.

"Do you know what this is, Harry?"

He looked down in dread, expecting to see some cousin to the Dark Mark, but found only three parallel lines. Two of them looked as if they were already healing. The third was still open and bleeding. Harry leaned back, staring at her face, and shook his head.

"They are the marks of my oath of vengeance," said Narcissa in a casual voice, "the one I took to make Bellatrix suffer three times over. I had inflicted two of those penalties on her, with the taking of her left hand and the cutting off of her breasts. Now I find that it is impossible for me to fulfill my oath, because someone else has killed her." She leaned forward until she was staring at Harry from an inch away. "I swore that knowing there was a chance that I would not fulfill it," she said quietly, "that someone else would slay Bella in battle before I had the chance to make her suffer again. But I never thought, Harry, that it would be you, someone who knew about my oath and has had first-hand experience with how vicious vows can be."

Harry winced. "What happens now?" he asked, because everyone, from Narcissa herself to Lucius, standing motionless in the door, seemed to expect it.

"I don't know," said Narcissa, drawing away. "It's been centuries since someone dared to swear and then violate that oath. But it will almost certainly wait in my future, fanged, trying to trap me into the greatest misfortune it can. It was Dark magic I invoked. And Dark magic is more unforgiving than the Light magic you favor, Harry, or the reckless magic of heroism." She shook her head and stepped away from him. "When Charles contacted us to tell us about Durmstrang, and that you'd killed Bellatrix, I felt as if I were falling."

Harry looked away, but in doing that, he caught Lucius's eyes, which said he should have done anything rather than kill Bellatrix and damn Narcissa. He looked at his hand, shame winning out over his anger again.

"So your reckless act has had consequences for people beyond yourself and Miss Granger, Harry," said Snape, his voice deep with some emotion Harry didn't want to examine too closely. "What have you to say now? Will you think twice about risking your life in the future, or will the desire to be a hero overcome you and make you dash off again?"

He paused, telling Harry it wasn't a rhetorical question. He swallowed. "It wasn't like that," he whispered. "I didn't do it out of desire to be a hero."

"But you were thinking less about your own life and more about the lives of others," Draco said. "Is that a fair summary, Harry?"

"Yes, but—"

"You are only making excuses, now," said Snape. "You know that what you did was reckless, and there is no reason but the greatest good luck for it to have turned out as well as it did. You are acting like a child, Harry, after some time of making progress. And if you will not agree to some restrictions of your own free will, you will drive us to measures you hate, simply to ease our fears."

"I didn't mean to do that," said Harry, thinking of Hermione's lack of expression, thinking of the way that the pain in Owen's face had eased when his brother healed him. It hadn't just been the pain of his broken leg. "I didn't—there were other concerns at stake—"

"Not as important as your life," said Draco, and settled a possessive arm around his waist. "Nothing is as important as your life."

"I just—there are times when—"

"You should have thought," said Snape, and his voice had a smugness that sank claws into Harry's temper. "You should have

remembered that your enemy was a known liar and a Death Eater who would stop at nothing to hurt you. You were foolish to trust whatever honor he pretended to observe with the life debt. Foolishness, childishness, and perhaps lack of thought? Do those complete the list of your mistakes? No, they do not—“

“Stop it!”

Harry hadn't known he would shout before he lifted his voice to do it. It appeared to startle most of the other people in the room, too. Narcissa took a step away from him, and Snape shut up, and Draco's arm fell limply from his waist. The look in Lucius's eyes grew colder. McGonagall blinked.

“I did the best I could with what I thought I knew at the time and the circumstances I had,” said Harry. He realized he'd stood up, too. He didn't remember doing that. He stared at Snape's face, trying to make him see reason. “I didn't know that about the silver collars, sir, because you never told me. And I did believe he would kill Hermione. And once I was at Durmstrang, I did what I thought I had to do. If I hadn't killed her, Mrs. Malfoy, then Rosier would have. I'm sorry about the oath, but it was going to be broken no matter what happened tonight.” As he spoke, he grew calmer, but he could feel the leashed beast of his temper straining under the surface. If they just accepted this, as he hoped they would, then he wouldn't have to shout any more.

Snape, of course, didn't accept it.

“The main problem, Harry, is that you did not think,” he said. “You claim to have changed, but you still follow your instincts in such situations, and not your thoughts. If I were in your place, I would have—“

“Shut up,” said Harry, with such ugly force in his voice that Snape did. “If you were in my place, you would have done wonderfully. Of course you say that. But you weren't in it, were you? And it's very easy to judge from the outside, isn't it, the way you judge the failure of your students in Potions? And you judge, you snipe, you snap, instead of for just once trying something else—“ He struggled, and managed to

restrain the words that wanted to burst forth. They were too personal to say in front of other people. He was not a pathetic child wanting something more than that judgment from Snape. He wasn't.

"If someone outside your situation could see what needed to be done so clearly—" Snape began.

"You weren't there!" Harry screamed at him. "None of you ever are! That's why I have to make decisions on my own, because I'm the only one who's bloody there, and my enemies aren't the kind to wait around politely while I debate morality in my head! And yes, sometimes, I think a missed night of sleep is more than enough recompense for my endangering my life, which happens all the time anyway! At least this time I got something out of it!"

"But that's what you say every time," Draco protested.

Harry turned on him. "No, most of the time I just accept your scolding as deserved, Draco," he snarled. "I might argue a little, but then I give in and promise that I won't do it again. And we both know those promises are false, because Voldemort—stop flinching, Merlin damn you!—won't stop using those techniques. Because they work. It's useless for me to promise that I won't go away without consulting you, because then I'll end up betraying something deeper."

"Like what?" Draco had risen to his feet in turn, and though his face was pale, he spoke challengingly.

"Everything I am, for a start," Harry said. "And the same thing will happen when I start killing in cold blood without asking questions, or when I start dithering and sacrificing lives in a situation that calls for direct action. Sometimes, all I can do is survive. Tell me something, show me a way, that lets me do something else, and I'll do that. But I'm not going to become the kind of hardened soldier you think I should be. I escaped from that. That's the way Lily trained me to be, a silent soldier who accepts sacrifices as sad but necessary. I won't go back to that. I've fought too hard. So, sorry, Draco, but I won't place myself above other people just because I'm important to you, or because I'm important to the war effort."

"You have to," Draco said, and his face had turned paler. "Sometimes, Harry, you have to. If Voldemort is going to kill a dozen children in front of you, and says that he'll spare their lives if you just come down to him, would you really give up your life?"

"I'd do what I could," said Harry. "And then, yes, Draco, I would suffer for it, and question whether I couldn't have made a better decision. I'll fight this war my own way. It'll always be my own way. I'm not Dumbledore, and I'm not Voldemort, and I'm not a Malfoy. And I'm not just in love with you, though it's an important part of who I am." He glanced sideways at Snape. "And I'm not just your ward, either, and you don't seem to understand that. I'm not going to submit to the kind of restrictions you want, because they're stupid restrictions, and they would interfere with my life more than Rosier wants to. I want more than other people want for me. Sometimes," he added, choking on the bitterness that bubbled up his throat, "I don't know whether you've really accepted that I've started healing, even though you encouraged me to do it. I'm healing into a person who wants more than just what the two of you think I should want. And sometimes I think that you don't know that any more than Lily did."

The silence in the wake of that was boulder-heavy. Snape's face had assumed an expression Harry had no name for. Draco had put out a hand towards Harry, but he retracted it towards his side now, snapping it into a fist. His face had turned the color of whey.

"I'm tired," Harry finished. "And I survived, and I did the best I thought I could under the circumstances." He nodded to Narcissa, who watched him as if he were someone she had never seen before. "And, Mrs. Malfoy, I'm sorry about your oath, but I won't be responsible for the breaking of it. You knew the risk when you made it. You're an adult. If I allow that to you, will you allow my mistakes to me?"

Narcissa shook her head, but Harry wasn't sure what part of his declaration she was answering. Harry moved towards the door.

Lucius stood in his way.

Harry met his eyes and waited. Lucius inclined his head an infinitesimal amount and stood aside.

Harry went down the moving staircase more rapidly than it wanted to go, springing from step to step, and made his way as quickly as he could to a window. He didn't want to go outside, not when the wards were this weak, though he wished he could spring on a broom and fly. He leaned out the window, though, and panted in the cool air, which made his throat burn with something other than the anger that had flayed it so far. Harry leaned his head on his hand and stared up at the sky, which showed only stars.

Light pierced the darkness near him. He blinked at the sky, and then the hall, and then his hand. Phoenix fire was surging in it again, responding, Harry supposed, to his emotions. He could sing, too, if he wanted.

Harry closed his eyes and swallowed the song, and willed the fire to lie down. He was something more than what Fawkes had given him, something more than Draco's boyfriend, something more than Snape's ward, something more than the war leader of the alliance and Voldemort's enemy. If he wasn't going to let the label "abused child" define him, then why should he let others close on him like chains? He wouldn't, and perhaps he'd been wrong and that wasn't what other people wanted to do to him, but it was what he felt they'd done to him, and he shivered with pain and anger and fear of being caged, and that was all right. No need to go crawling back to Snape and Draco and ask their forgiveness at once, not if what they'd taught him was true. No need to go talk to Vera, because these emotions weren't unnatural or the product of his training. He was feeling, thinking, as himself, and it was all right.

He opened his eyes slowly, and looked at the stars again. His breathing had slowed, and the emotions felt less bitter and poisonous than they had before, as if he didn't need to tear himself apart just because he'd felt them.

Perhaps this was a purging, after all.

And then, since he was tired, he stood and turned back towards the dungeons, so that he could get some sleep.

Chapter Sixty-Three: Cousin Arcturus Had a Sense of Humor

January 22nd, 1995

Dear Harry:

I am writing to thank you for freeing my children from Durmstrang and the control of that madwoman. Thank you seems inadequate to express my true gratitude, but unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately, considering the use to which they would sometimes be put—English does not contain other words that approach what I mean, either. I have had the tale from Owen and Michael both, how you appeared, how you severed Bellatrix's hand, and how you destroyed it. Owen was close enough to hear what she whispered to you, and I can only say that destroying your own flesh when the Dark Lord's minions had already cut it from your body may be accounted another sacrifice. They know you could not stay and why. Thank you for pulling down the lightning ward as well; it served as a signal to us that something had changed inside the school, and not something Bellatrix would have wanted. I was part of a shift of parents watching that night. We Apparated in immediately, of course.

I am writing this letter because I understand, from speaking with Mr. Malfoy, that some people view your actions very differently than I do. A spoken communication to you may not be believed. A written letter, you may show to whomever you like, and they will then see that one of your allies stands behind you whatever may come from now on, snow or lightning or high water.

Yours in all gratitude that the English language offers, and some that it does not,

Charles Rosier-Henlin.

Harry folded the letter carefully, and slid it into his pocket. The eagle-owl that carried it had found him at the top of the Owlery, where he'd come to visit Hedwig. Harry supposed it was meant to find him at the school table, where no one could miss that someone was pleased enough with Harry to send such a magnificent bird, but this was just

as well. Harry had the choice now of concealing that he'd received post, if he wanted.

Hedwig made a jealous sound as Harry fed the eagle-owl a treat. The eagle-owl gave her a look of glacial contempt which Hedwig returned. Then she turned back to Harry and ran a strand of hair through her beak, nibbling at it.

"Yes, you're still my favorite," Harry reassured her, turning around so that he could pet her. Sometimes it was a pain having no hand on the opposite side.

Hedwig hooted proudly at the eagle-owl, but it had already lost interest in them and launched itself towards the Owlery window. Harry shook his head as he watched it fly away. The sky beyond the window was a clear pearly-gray, already shedding opportunistic flakes of snow. Harry knew it would only get more bitterly cold as the week wore on. He wasn't looking forward to playing against Ravenclaw this weekend, though Warming Charms and thick robes would protect them when they flew.

"Harry?"

Surprised, he turned his head, and then blinked. Connor stood in the Owlery entrance behind him, sticking his hands into his robe pockets as the chill penetrated his skin. Harry had spoken with him yesterday and told him the story of the fight with Draco and Snape—the first of whom had tried to talk about what had happened with him in such a way that showed he wasn't ready to admit the rightness of anything Harry said, and whom he'd walked away from—but he hadn't expected Connor to find him this morning.

"I thought you might like some company when you walk down to breakfast," said Connor quietly. "I know it's usually with Malfoy, and, well..." He shrugged as if he were embarrassed to be bringing it up now, and scratched the back of his neck.

"That's welcome, Connor, actually. Thank you." Harry let Hedwig go with one final scratch to her breast feathers, and then reached up and drew Argutus gently out of his sleeve. "You said to let you know when

we were leaving the cold place” he told the snake, who refused to trust Warming Charms to actually keep him warm.

“Now we are? Good.” Argutus lifted his head out and tested the air with his tongue, seeming ready to hide again until Harry and Connor actually walked through the door and down the steps. “It is beyond me why you wish to come to the cold places. You should stay in the warm places and sleep when you feel bad. In fact, you should stay in the warm places and sleep even when you do not feel bad. It keeps you healthy.”

Harry smiled and shook his head. Argutus understood little of the terms of the argument that Harry, Draco, and Snape had had, so he conceived it to mean that Harry “felt bad,” and should therefore spend a lot of time in bed with his faithful snake coiled around him. He’d been disappointed when Harry got up yesterday and insisted on studying and eating and moving around.

“There’s one thing I still don’t understand.”

Harry glanced back at Connor to make sure that he would speak English. “What’s that?”

“I mean—you did the best you could,” said Connor. “Just like the trial, and lots of other situations they’ve seen you do the best you could in.”

Harry nodded, and then had to stop and pick Argutus up as he misjudged his ability to coil around the very edge of Harry’s severed left wrist and fell on the floor. Argutus slid back up his sleeve in embarrassment.

“So why is this so different?” Connor asked.

“I don’t know,” Harry mused. “Perhaps the timing of it. Lots of things have happened in a few months—” Connor smothered a laugh. Harry glared at him. “Well, they have. Maybe they got tired of it. Or maybe they’ve been so worried for so long that it erupted like this. Or maybe they really did think that I never answered back because I agreed

with them, instead of just thinking they might be right, and not wanting to say things I'd regret."

"Well, either way, it's stupid," said Connor.

"I quite agree."

They ran into several Gryffindors coming from the Tower on their way down, including the Weasley twins, Hermione, and Edith Bulstrode, who had quickly become fast friends with at least one girl in her year. Harry divided his observation between them. Hermione wasn't nearly as pale as she had been the night Rosier kidnapped her, but she still gave every shadow they passed a nervous glance; Harry thought Rosier might have grabbed her in a shadowy corner. Edith never spoke very loudly, and blushed when someone looked at her too long, but she was healing slowly, Harry thought. Her mother had stepped hard on her, but she hadn't managed to pound or crush everything good out of her. Edith still had deep roots and even a bright blossom, if she could be persuaded to raise her head.

She saw him looking and flushed again, but she smiled. Harry smiled back at her, and then had his attention insistently caught by the twin he thought was George.

"Did you say that—"

"Professor Snape argued with you?" Fred finished. "That was the rumor yesterday, at any rate."

Harry snorted. "Yes, but it's not about anything to do with Potions," he said. "Thanks for asking, though."

The twins exchanged a sly glance, and Harry could feel his eyes narrow. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Doing?" Fred asked, a wildly innocent expression on his face. "Why must we be—"

"Doing something all the time?" George asked. "We're pure, Harry! Clean as the driven snow!"

Harry thought of the snow that blew across his face during winter Quidditch practice, and the slush it usually collected and melted into when lots of people had been stepping on it. "I can believe that," he said.

The twins snickered in unison, and put their heads together. Harry sped up a little. If they actually planned on pranking Snape, then he didn't want to know about it.

They entered the Great Hall together, much more noisily than Harry usually entered it; Gryffindors would talk about anything, it seemed, and at the top of their lungs, and at a point in the day when most of the people at the other House tables were still half-asleep. Harry caught many drowsy glares directed their way, but as he broke from them and turned towards the Slytherin table, only two remained fixed on him specifically. One from the head table and one from Slytherin, of course, beside a seat what had remained empty.

Harry didn't take it; this early, there were plenty of other places on the bench. He sat down beside Millicent, who nodded as if she understood every nuance of their argument, though Harry doubted she did. He and Draco had argued in an empty corridor rather than the Slytherin common room yesterday. He reached for the plate of pancakes, responding absently to the questions a fourth-year was asking him about Divination. Conversation about that subject didn't need much attention at the worst of times.

"I just wanted to tell you something."

Harry looked up, again surprised; he hadn't noticed Connor following him to the Slytherin table. Connor stood in front of Draco, who turned his head slowly to give him the full force of a haughty Malfoy glare. Connor didn't seem intimidated. He'd seemed much less intimidated altogether since he'd become the Potter heir, Harry had noticed.

"What?" Draco asked at last, in a voice that could cut ice.

Connor leaned forward until he was nose to nose with Draco. "You're being stupid," he said, and then turned and strode towards the Gryffindor table, leaving Draco blinking at his back.

Harry looked down at his plate, pretending he hadn't been paying attention when Draco glanced at him, and hid his smile in his breakfast.

When he finished, of course, and stood to make his way to Double Potions, Draco's hand was insistent on his shoulder. Harry looked into his face and sighed. "I'll be along in a minute," he told Blaise, who'd lingered to wait for him.

"Why wait?" Draco said, his voice steady. "After all, we have the class together. We'll walk together."

Harry bit his tongue. If Draco wanted to fight in front of an audience, then that was what would happen. He turned and began walking towards the entrance of the Great Hall, fast enough to force Draco and Blaise to scramble after him. Draco was flushed from more than exertion when he came up beside Harry, and he grabbed his shoulder again. Harry shook himself free with a movement he'd learned in his training with Lily.

"Stop this," said Draco, as if that had been his breaking point, his voice sharp as frozen crystal.

"No," said Harry in the same tone.

"You know that we have a point, Harry—"

"About calling me a foolish child who'll never learn? About expecting that I should just submit to monitoring spells like a baby? About saying that I should have considered my life before anyone else's?" Harry snorted. "Forgive me if I think none of that's worthy of a serious response, Draco."

"But you have to—"

"No," said Harry. "I don't have to."

"But I've been reading history," Draco insisted. "I've read about war leaders, Harry. And Lords, even though I know you hate the term. They all had to harden their hearts to survive war. And when they did something foolish, like trying to go out and rescue a doomed group of soldiers, then their companions had to do the right thing, and sit on them."

"You're a bit too slow, then," Harry sniped at him. "You're always trying to sit on me when the doomed soldiers are already safely back in the camp."

"If you wouldn't get into these situations in the first place, then we wouldn't have the urge to do this!" Harry didn't look at Draco, but he knew his face would be turning pink.

"Oh, yes, Draco, I get into these situations on purpose," Harry snarled. "I walk around with food in my outstretched hand, calling to Voldemort—and I think you're a child for flinching at his name, by the way—to please come bite it off at the wrist! I lure Rosier to me with a trail of bread crumbs, and beg him to kidnap Hermione so that I'll have something heroic to do! And I just can't go a week without killing someone. I long for it. I pant for it. I yearn for it. That's why you're always having to sit on me when the danger's past, not because Voldemort hates me and Rosier's a bloody madman!"

"I didn't mean it like that," said Draco.

"You never do," Harry said, distantly, and strode ahead of him, Blaise at his side. Draco willingly dropped behind. Harry didn't know what he was thinking. He'd almost think that his words had to be making an impression on that thick skull, but, on the other hand, Draco seemed incapable of giving in; he wanted Harry to admit that he was absolutely right, rather than saying that sometimes he could be wrong. Harry could have compromised if it had been understood that he wouldn't be a good little boy and always tell Snape and Draco where he was going, because that was impossible. Both Draco and Snape seemed to think that he could be a good little boy with just a little more effort.

“Wow,” said Blaise at last.

Harry grinned sideways at him. “A bit more explosive than our usual arguments,” he agreed, proud of himself for his calm tone. He wasn’t flaying himself with guilt for arguing at all, because this time, he was right. He wasn’t trembling in anxiety for the day when he could reconcile with Draco and Snape, though Merlin knew he wanted it. It felt wonderful to have honest anger supporting him. “Now, did you read about the potion we’re doing today? It’s tricky. The potion will congeal if you don’t add a counterclockwise stir at the end of every nine clockwise stirs, even though most of the books don’t say that...” Snape noticed signs of trouble the moment he entered Double Potions that morning. Harry was sitting on the other side of the room from Draco, with Blaise. Draco sat by himself, sulking, though Padma Patil, the only one in the room who didn’t have a partner so far, had planted herself tentatively at his shoulder.

Snape concealed a snarl. Harry doing that simply to hurt Draco is unworthy of him.

The bitterness that had choked him for the past day rose up again. Harry had nearly died, and still he had the gall to act as if nothing had happened! He could not even make allowances for words that Snape would not have spoken if anger and guilt—at missing Harry’s descent into danger, again—and relief had not seized him in a maelstrom. He had to hold a grudge now, of all times, when at others, he had understood why Draco and Snape were worried. Snape wondered what was so different, this time of all times.

That he had to compare us to Lily Potter!

That had stung so violently that Snape hadn’t even attempted to speak to Harry yesterday. He had known he would shout about that remark, and Harry would defend himself, and everything would crash further down the pit than it had already fallen. He had stayed in his rooms, brooding and marking essays, and contented himself with the knowledge that Harry couldn’t really have meant it, that by the next day, things would be different.

It had been a nasty shock to come into breakfast that morning and see Draco sitting alone. And now this. Snape shook his head and drew his wand. It would be a day when he cast Potions instructions on the board and ignored the students for half the class, so that he could keep his temper when he walked among them later and tested the quality of their brewing.

He turned to the board and flicked his wand, envisioning the instructions for the Mind-Calming Potion.

A series of bright red bubbles rose out of his wand, followed by a confused kitten, who dropped to the floor and began to mew.

Snape stared. This was definitely his wand. What in Merlin's name—

He heard a helpless giggle from behind him, but when he whipped around, the students were all sitting with definitely shut mouths. Harry was looking at Blaise, as if he thought his face would turn red if he looked at Snape.

Snape turned back, this time whispering the incantation aloud under his breath. It wasn't common, but sometimes, when the caster of a nonverbal spell was sufficiently distracted, the effect would be something very different than what he'd intended without the words to shape and guide it.

This time, a second kitten joined the first, amid a series of pink bubbles. The kittens sniffed each other and began to crawl around the floor, toddling earnestly in the direction of the students. The giggles were louder now, and multiple.

Snape felt the muscles in his neck tighten. He was a few inches from snapping. That this had to happen now!

He spoke Lumos under his breath, and made the gesture with the wand perfectly; this was a spell he'd known long before he came to school, thanks to the patient instruction of his mother.

A blue pixie appeared on the tip of his wand, considered him for a moment, and flew away. Snape heard a snicker. It sounded like Harry's.

That was all it took to snap his calm, especially when it sounded as if the pixie had got into his ingredients stores.

"Out!" he screamed, whipping around. The students were already fleeing if they were Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw. Connor Potter lingered a moment, looking fascinated, and Harry was rising to his feet with an infuriating lack of concern. Snape stared directly at him. Harry looked back with no sign of guilt, but plenty of amusement. Snape snarled at him, and Harry rolled his eyes and turned his back, picking up his Potions book at a perfectly normal pace.

Snape was certain he could hear laughter out in the corridor.

He used wandless magic to slam and lock the door, and then settled down to examine his wand. It was, demonstrably, still his wand. His first thought had been that someone had switched it for one of the fake wands the Weasley twins had invented, but it was too familiar in his hand.

Then he cast Nox, and felt it. A tingle of magic ran through the wand just at the moment he voiced the spell, getting there barely ahead of his own incantation. It switched out his wand core and replaced it with a different one, one that caused a pink snake with hearts on its sides to land on his desk. The moment he stopped trying to cast, his old wand core reappeared.

Snape might have appreciated the sophistication of the trick at any other time; it took near-genius to devise a spell that would switch his core with something else without damaging the wand, and the person or persons who had done it had accomplished it without ever stealing his wand from his possession. But Snape didn't care, this day of all days. And he knew it had been the Weasley twins. He had no proof, but that had never stopped him from assigning detention.

He rose and turned towards the door, intending to find the twins, wherever they were now, and take points from them and assign

detention in front of their professor and entire class. That ought to be enough for the beginning of his vengeance.

He fell, sprawling. When he looked down, he found that the pixie had tied his robes together.

The pixie, the kittens, and the pink snake all got caught up in a rush of violent wandless magic in the next few minutes.

Harry shook his head as he headed back to the Slytherin common room after dinner. Draco had tried another variation of the argument, this time saying that of course, since he loved Harry so much, he was entitled to be a little unreasonable. Harry had said, "Not that unreasonable," and it had all gone downhill from there. This time, Draco hadn't taken even the relative privacy of a corridor, instead screaming at him in the Great Hall. Harry wondered if he had thought that would encourage Harry to back down and admit he was right sooner. It hadn't. It just made Harry more and more stubborn. He could accept compromise; he could admit that the remark comparing Snape and Draco to Lily would have hurt, for example. But he wasn't just going to say that they were right, and that seemed to be what they wanted.

"Oy, Harry!"

Harry turned in startlement, then smiled. Regulus stood behind him, propped against a wall of the entrance hall in a deliberately devil-may-care position, his head cocked to one side and his arms folded. "What are you doing here?" Harry asked, even as he went to him and hugged him. He hadn't seen Regulus since Christmas, though he assumed he knew of what was happening. The papers had certainly trumpeted Dumbledore's death loudly enough, and now the Daily Prophet was having a field day tracking down known supporters of Dumbledore and asking them if their views had changed. They tended to stammer in their interviews, and most of the pureblood Light students in the school made a point of stating loudly that they didn't think anyone could support Dumbledore now that it was known he'd been a Dark Lord.

"I heard about your fight with Draco and Severus," Regulus said. "Severus ranted at me for several hours yesterday about what you'd done."

Harry sighed and stepped away from Regulus. "If you came to plead for him, then—"

"No," Regulus interrupted. "I thought about telling him he was being stupid, at first, but that just entrenches Severus further into his position, as if he thinks that he has a right to be stupid when someone else notices. So I came to cheer you up instead. How would you like to visit Wayhouse?"

Harry hesitated. The truth was that he didn't have very much homework, and he'd only seen the house once, when he and Narcissa were searching for Regulus's body, and then not for very long. "Have you spoken to the Headmistress about taking me off school grounds?"

Regulus grinned at him. "So proper, Harry," he teased.

"I really try not to get into trouble," Harry said, all his defensiveness returning in a rush. "I do, you know. But when I do, then I don't see why I should have to think of what other people would do before what I have to do—"

"Hush," said Regulus, and his hand fell to caress Harry's hair. He seemed to know the trick of ruffling it without messing it up further, which Harry had thought once that only Lily did. "I know. I don't think it was fair, either. Just because I kept silent under Severus's tirade yesterday doesn't mean I didn't pick a side." He winked at Harry. "And it's the side my heir's on."

"I'm not going to be the Black heir," said Harry, exasperation of one kind turning into exasperation of another. "Really, Regulus."

"Oh, I haven't been trying to bribe or trick you into accepting the inheritance," said Regulus, his face exactly as innocent as the Weasley twins' had been that morning. "I just think you might like to

see beautiful things that won't endanger you, sometimes. And this time, you're right."

Harry wavered for a moment, but the only thing that really bothered him was a half-done Charms essay, and he didn't have Charms until after lunch tomorrow; he could easily get it done. "All right," he agreed, and followed Regulus towards the school entrance.

"I did speak to the Headmistress, as it happens," Regulus tossed back to him over his shoulder. "She seemed to think it was a good idea."

Harry nodded. It was becoming increasingly obvious that McGonagall had changed her mind about his needing to listen to Draco and Snape, perhaps because of how unreasonable they'd been. She'd taught their Transfiguration class today, and given Harry several smiles that she didn't have to.

Regulus pulled out a Portkey the moment they were out of the school, and Harry blinked. "Wouldn't it be better to just walk down the Hogsmeade road and Apparate?" he asked.

Regulus shook his head. "Wayhouse is temperamental," he said. "Currently, it's decided that no one should Apparate to it. I can't remove the wards that would let me do that, because Cousin Arcturus built that house and essentially gave it free will. So when it doesn't want me to do something, I can't. It obeys me in the big things, but the little things are all its own."

Harry smiled at that—the house sounded like the Many—and reached out, gripping the Portkey, which looked like a sweet wrapper, with his hand. Argutus watched in interest from his left wrist as they whirled around and the world changed positions. The little snake liked to travel by Portkey lately, though Harry didn't understand why.

They landed in a room that Harry only vaguely remembered, one of those he'd searched with Narcissa. He straightened up, glanced around, and nodded. Yes, this was Wayhouse. Its walls were built of silvery wood, and molded and dipped in odd shapes, as if he stood inside a hollow tree. And the magic sang around him. Not even

Malfoy Manor or Lux Aeterna showed their power so obviously; Harry guessed both Dark and Light purebloods usually thought some modicum of decorum necessary. Not Wayhouse. Harry could feel the multiple spells humming on the staircases, and the room they stood in, which might once have been a nursery, had small spells fastened to the walls, apparently just because.

There was something odd about the place, though, beyond its general oddness. Harry shifted and glanced over his shoulder. He felt as though someone were watching him, even though no portrait hung in the room.

“Regulus?” he asked.

“Hmmm?” Regulus had worked his way over to the other side of the room, and a large mosaic made entirely of polished blue shells. “Watch this, Harry.” He stroked the shells, and they went into motion, bending and rising to mimic waves of the sea. Harry stepped closer, and smiled to see merfolk rising from the waves, mostly to stick their tongues out at the watchers and then dive back again.

“Do you feel like someone’s watching you? Is it normal?”

Regulus blinked at him, puzzled. “Well, no. I mean, Cousin Arcturus does sometimes leave his portrait and wander around the house, but I can feel him right now, and he’s asleep. Is something the matter?”

“Someone is watching me,” said Harry, as the instinct, sharpened through years of training, grew more and more insistent. “I don’t know why. It’s annoying,” he added, raising his voice, just in case the eyes belonged to something that could hear him and be persuaded to stop.

The thing watching did seem to hear him, but the sensation of eyes just sharpened instead. The next thing Harry knew, teeth closed on his ankle. He hopped backward, swearing, even as he remembered one room he had seen when he was here with Narcissa, where small creatures darted out from the bed to bite his ankles.

When he looked down, he suspected that he was in rather more trouble. A long tendril of silver-green extended from the wall,

resembling a thin snake. It tugged him insistently nearer to the wall, and Harry had to hop with the pull. It felt as though the teeth were hooked under his skin.

Regulus, behind him, didn't sound alarmed. "It's all right, Harry. I didn't know this would happen, but it's normal." His voice had an undertone of excitement that didn't really reassure Harry. "Just go to the wall. The house wants to taste you."

"Taste me?" Harry shook his head, but kept hopping, giving in to the snake's impatient tugs, until he stood next to the silvery wood wall it sprouted out of. Immediately, an enormous blue tongue formed and licked his face, then moved down and licked a shoulder through his robes, then swiped each arm and leg.

Harry shuddered. The tongue was cold and wet. He could imagine that Arcturus Black had probably thought this a hugely funny joke to wake his guests in the night with, but he wished he could have heard about it instead of experienced it.

The tongue let him go. Harry realized the snake had, too, and backed away from the wall, watching it warily. The tongue slid over a pair of enormous lips, and then retracted into the wood with a satisfied purr.

Harry felt a new presence in his mind at the same moment. It bedded down behind his thoughts, and purred.

"What in Merlin's name—" he said, a feeble exclamation, because he thought his voice would start shaking if he tried anything else.

"I told you Wayhouse had its own free will," said Regulus, sounding so exultant that Harry turned to him rather warily. Regulus was grinning wildly. "It's decided that it would like to bond to you. Now it'll listen to you rather than me."

"That's ridiculous," said Harry flatly. "You're still the one who owns the house."

Regulus snorted. "That's true for Silver-Mirror and Copley-by-the-Sea and Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, Harry, but not Wayhouse, not anymore. Go on. Tell it to do something."

"And if it does nothing?" Harry retorted. "You said that it could do anything it wanted. I still think you're joking."

"Tell it to do something," Regulus repeated insistently. "It just chose you. I think it wants to show off for you."

Harry rolled his eyes, but murmured, "Would you move the mural from the left side of the room to the right one?"

The mural of blue shells vanished at once, melting into the wall like the water it resembled, and then reappeared just to the side of Regulus, who whooped and then collapsed into the chair behind him, laughing. The chair shuffled backwards, and Regulus sat down with a thump, but that didn't stop his laughter.

"Why do you think this is so funny?" Harry was staring at the mural, disconcerted. He couldn't really feel his bond to the house anymore, but he knew it must be there. And he had not the slightest idea in the world why it had chosen him. Maybe Wayhouse's motives really were unfathomable.

Regulus looked up, grinning. "This would have happened anyway, Harry, if you'd agreed to become my heir; Wayhouse would have transferred the bond to you on my death, unless it decided to be temperamental and find someone it liked better. Then you'd have to share the Black legacy with that person, whoever it was. That's a change that my grandfather worked into the legacy. The Black fortune and lands and houses are only supposed to have one heir, but he knew he couldn't control Wayhouse after Cousin Arcturus built it, so there's a single exception for it, just in case this ever happened. Now it's decided to transfer to you while I'm still alive. Don't you think it'd make more sense for you to become my heir now? I'd have to share the fortune with you anyway. Legal rules, you see, and Grandfather's." Regulus all but batted his eyes at him.

"You knew this would happen!" Harry accused him.

"I didn't," Regulus denied promptly. "Not at all. Wayhouse had plenty of chances with other heirs, you know. My cousins used to visit it all the time. And it's not like it had to choose you. I certainly couldn't force it. It does whatever it wants, Harry."

"You don't have to make me your heir," said Harry. "You could just ignore the rules. You do all the time anyway," he added. "No one else has to know this happened."

"Grandfather thought of that, too," said Regulus happily. "There's already been a change on the official records in the Ministry. And now you have access to the Black vaults, and all the treasures of Wayhouse are officially yours. Come on, Harry." Regulus reached into his robe pocket, pulled out a sheaf of parchments, and waved it coaxingly at Harry. "I have all the papers signed, finally, so that I can take an heir who's neither related to me by blood—well, you are, but so distantly that trying to take you as a blood heir wouldn't stand up against the claims of my cousins—nor in sympathy with my magic. You're practically half heir already. It would make me peaceful to know that I don't have to find someone else to leave the rest of the fortune and houses to."

"Draco would—"

"Draco is a Malfoy, not a Black, and has plenty of things to inherit," said Regulus firmly. "Besides, I don't like him all the time. And Narcissa the same. She ought to have known better than to swear that stupid oath. So. Harry. What do you say?"

Harry sighed and looked around Wayhouse. He tried to frame a question in his mind about the house taking another heir, not sure it would hear him.

Can't, came the immediate response. Won't. Shan't!

Harry sighed again and looked back at Regulus. "I have access to the vaults anyway, you said."

Regulus nodded. "Like I said, it would otherwise have been the heir's undivided, but now that Wayhouse is bonded to you, it would be shared—assuming the heir is anyone else."

Harry bit his lip. He could think of things he could accomplish with the Black money, and having Wayhouse as a sanctuary to retreat to would ease his life; that wasn't the problem. He was still unsure if he could accept it, though.

Is it too selfish, to accept the money? Is Regulus only not offering it to Draco and Narcissa because he's irritated at them right now?

"You're sure you won't change your mind?" he asked Regulus, testing.

Regulus's face softened. "I never will," he said. "I promise, Harry. Even if I met a child in sympathy with my magic, that doesn't mean I'd like him or her as a person. Lots of families adopt a child like that just because they're desperate. I never will be that desperate. And assuming I did marry and have children, I know that I could rely on you to help take care of them. You'd never refuse to give them a home if I died, or throw them out without a Knut to their names. So, yes. I can't imagine finding a better heir. I know you, and I know you're more than good enough to be my heir." He held Harry's gaze.

Harry took a deep breath. "I accept, then."

Regulus crowed softly, and shook the papers. "You have to sign in a few places," he said. "Well, more than a few," he amended as parchment tumbled to the floor in a merry rain. "But it's just signing. Your signature carries your magic, and binds you to the properties and fortune." He paused for a moment, then added, "You could take the name of Black, if you wanted to."

"No," said Harry sharply. "At least, not yet."

Regulus only grinned as if he'd expected nothing less, and held out the parchments to Harry again. Harry had to smile back as he looked around for a table to sign his name on, and found Wayhouse mushrooming one at him immediately. The way he signed was only half-reluctant.

It was silly arguing against a transfer of power that it seemed had already happened. And money, at least, and political power were tools Harry could imagine wielding without as much anxiety as he felt about his magic.

I already know the first two things I'm going to do, he thought, as he finished the final signature with a flourish. In his head, Wayhouse hummed in what felt like happy agreement.

Chapter Sixty-Four: Stalked

Harry opened his eyes slowly and rolled over. His mind leaped immediately into motion, making plans for today. He smiled. Regulus had told him that the papers in the Ministry had changed immediately when he finished signing the ones in Wayhouse, marking him as the Black heir, but it had been so late in the evening by the time he finished that Harry had decided to wait and start making the changes he wanted to make tomorrow.

Not even yet another odd, mist-shrouded dream of a corridor lined with locked doors, leading to one he was unable to open, and Voldemort's frustration that left a burning pain in his scar could dampen his good mood.

Seeing the strange bird with the teeth and clawed wings sitting in his bed and staring at him did. Harry sat up quickly, his magic coiling once around him and lashing at the bird.

It passed through it without any effect, except for starting a slight fire in his bed-curtains. Harry put it out, watching the bird all the while. It preened itself, cracking feathers in its jaws before it looked back at him, and that voice spoke in his head again, rather like dropping words into the past than speaking full-out in the present.

You have not learned. You will not learn until it is too late. Unlike the other times, the bird sounded almost cheerful about their mysterious binding this time, or at least smug. Then we shall have to live with each other. I suppose you are not so bad. Entertaining in your stupidity, at least, to still think you can hurt me. I can be wherever you are, Harry.

"Why can you hurt me, if I can't hurt you?" Harry whispered challengingly. Unlike the time he had seen the bird right before his parents' trial, he found himself more angry than worried. No laws of magic that he knew explained the bird. None explained its ability to pass in and out of Hogwarts' wards, either. He thought he had a right to be angry.

That is part of the bond. The bird stretched its wings and hopped a little nearer to him. Harry pulled his arms back. The bird laughed at him, a snorting, chuckling, vicious sound, and then hopped into the air and flew at him. Harry ducked, but it was too late. Those freezing claws passed across the lightning bolt scar on his forehead, the blood that it drew mingling with the blood from his nightmare.

To see you later, said the bird, and spread its wings, and rose, and vanished.

Harry sat where he was, panting for a moment and gingerly feeling the depth of the cuts. They felt like the last ones he'd got, and those had healed without leaving anything but scabs that fell off eventually. Still, it would be harder to hide them or explain them away as the result of stumbles than the last ones had been. Harry rose to go to the loo. It was practically time to get up for class anyway.

He drew his curtains back, and found Draco standing there, staring at him.

Harry stared back. His anger at the bird mingled with a rush of the older, harder anger he felt at Draco and Snape right now, and made it easy. Draco was the one who looked away first, though his voice showed no sign that he was no longer meeting Harry's eyes.

"What happened to your forehead?"

"A magical bird showed up and cut it," said Harry, which was nothing less than the truth, and made to push past Draco.

Draco caught his arm and turned him around. Harry went with it only because he didn't—yet—want to start a physical fight. He would if he had to. He stared into Draco's eyes again, and again it was Draco who looked away.

"I felt an odd sensation last night," he said. "I didn't understand what it was at first, but then Mother contacted me. She said you're Black heir, and what we felt was the magic of our bloodline readjusting to accept someone who isn't related directly by blood."

“That’s right,” said Harry. “Regulus told me certain truths last night that made me decide it was best to accept the legacy.”

“So is he your family now?”

Harry took in Draco’s tension, and remembered how upset Draco had been when Harry told him he didn’t really consider the Malfoys his family. “Not in the way you mean,” Harry said. “I haven’t taken his last name, and he’s only adopted me as an heir, the way that you could do with someone else in a normal will. I don’t consider him a father. More like a brother, if anything,” he added, with a slight frown. Come to think of it, perhaps it was better if Regulus waited for a while before he married and had children. Harry didn’t think he’d be a good father right now.

“But you still share something with him that you don’t share with me.”

Harry didn’t know why that declaration broke his will to stand here and have this strange sort of half-argument with Draco. He tugged his arm, and Draco, surprised, let go of it.

“I share lots of things with other people that I don’t share with you, Draco,” Harry snapped. “Honestly. I would have said, before we had this fight, that you understood that. I share danger with my enemies, and memories of childhood with my brother—”

“You were never a child,” Draco interrupted.

“So now you think that,” said Harry. “But I mean it, Draco. I shared plenty of games and adventures with him that children have and play. And I share bonds with my allies that you don’t understand in detail, and friendships with people like Hermione—” he was watching, and saw the way Draco wrinkled his nose, his prejudice towards Muggleborns apparently unconquered “—and life debts, and, Merlin, everything with someone else.”

Draco’s eyes widened. “So you could find someone to fill my place in your life?” he asked.

“Argh,” said Harry, knowing he was not being eloquent. “Don’t be an idiot, Draco. No. I love you. But it doesn’t mean I share everything with you. It doesn’t mean I never think you’re wrong. It doesn’t mean that we’re going to always avoid fighting.”

“But I thought we were,” said Draco quietly. “You asked me what I wanted from you, Harry. I told you. To be the most important person in your life, among other things.” His face was flushing. “I don’t think that’s too much to ask, with how much support I’ve given you and the gifts you hand everyone else every day.”

Harry stared hard at Draco, ignoring Argutus’s suggestion that everything would become clearer if they just curled back up into bed together and let a small snake sleep in the warmth of their cradled bodies. Draco showed no signs of backing down this time, or of looking away. Harry supposed they had arrived at the core and heart of the argument. Draco resented being left out of Harry’s dangerous escapades not just because Harry might get hurt, but because he wanted to share them with Harry. To share everything, really.

“I can’t share everything with you,” said Harry. “Not everything.”

“And I said—“

“It’s impossible, Draco.” Harry could hear his voice soaring and knew from Blaise’s sleepy grumble that they’d woken him up. He ignored that, too. “There will always be situations that I get into where I can’t go for you, or where you’re somewhere else entirely, and then I have to fight or rescue someone else or make plans or whatever and you’re not there to advise or consult. I can tell you about them later, but that’s not the same thing, is it?” he finished, thinking of the way that Draco had always resented being left out of the confrontation Harry and Connor had had with Sirius in the Shrieking Shack, even though Harry had told him all about it later and he’d seen the memories. “You always want to be there.”

“I don’t think it’s so unreasonable,” Draco said, voice like flashfire.

“Tell me,” said Harry, “would you let me watch a ceremony that’s special to the Malfoys? How your father confirms you as magical heir,

for instance? I know that's private for most of the pureblood families. Oh, you announce it afterwards and have festivities to honor it, but the actual ceremony is private."

"Of course it is," said Draco, whose face was slowly flushing. "Our enemies could get too good an idea of how to hurt us if we held them in public, or even with anyone but those who are Malfoy by blood attending."

"So, you see," said Harry, folding his arms. "There's one example where you can't share something with me. So why should I be able to share the whole of my life with you?"

"But you don't—" Draco began, and then stopped. His flush altered.

"Oh, do finish that sentence," said Harry, taking a step forward. "I'd like to hear what you have to say about it."

"I—"

"Say it, Draco. Say exactly what you meant to say," Harry goaded him.

"I don't want—"

"Since we're supposed to be able to share everything, after all."

"All right!" Draco burst out, not seeming to hear the moan that came from Blaise. "You don't have a family, Harry! You don't have ceremonies like that, since you chose to renounce your surname! You're not pureblood! It's not comparable!"

The silence that followed that reminded Harry of the moment after he'd compared Draco and Snape to Lily, except that that previous meeting didn't have Blaise whimpering about lost sleep in the corner. Draco looked similarly horror-stricken. Harry had the same feeling of having jumped an obstacle they hadn't known was that high, and landing safely on the other side. He swallowed, and nodded, and met Draco's gaze.

“So, you see,” he said, proud of how steady his voice was, “there are some differences between us, Draco. I would never insist that you be lesser than I am. If you think something is deficient in my behavior towards you, I rely on you to tell me, not sulk around and hide what you really feel behind other things. I can’t fix my mistakes if I don’t know what they are. Similarly, I won’t accuse you of hurting me without explaining the accusations. And we are both going to make mistakes, and we are both going to have parts of our lives that we don’t share with each other, Draco. We are different people. Sometimes I think you know that, and sometimes I think you always envisioned that I would become just like you as I shed my training. That’s not true. You’re right. I’ll never be pureblood. I’ll never have the blood, and I’ll never have the prejudices.” He took a step closer to Draco, though his every instinct was screaming at him to retreat and, if nothing else, have the last bit of this argument in private. It was too late, though. If he moved, he would lose his momentum, and he might never gain back this kind of silence with which Draco was listening to him now, quiet, rapt. “We are both different people, Draco. I’m becoming who I am. I think you have to become who you are, too. And maybe it’s good that we’re fighting now, and can’t forgive each other these words just yet. Maybe that will give you time to figure out who you are, not just who you want me to be.”

He turned away and strode towards the loo, hoping his shaking muscles weren’t visible. Then he doubted it mattered. Draco would be entirely involved in his own thoughts right now, as he should be.

A part of Harry’s anger shifted and melted into compassion. Draco had ideas about who he was, but they tended to drift in a cloud long after they should have solidified. Maybe this would give him the push he needed to turn them into ice, or stone.

Draco lay on his back and stared up at the ceiling of his four-poster. Blaise had drawn back the curtains and asked if he was going down to breakfast, but after one look at his face, had quietly shut them again. Draco was glad. He knew he would get in trouble for skiving off Arithmancy, but he didn’t care.

In fact, the gladness and the indifference were both smaller ice floes drifting around in a larger, widening sea of cold shock. He shivered

now and then, as if he could actually feel a wind on his skin, despite the thick pyjamas he wore.

He...

What did he want?

Oh, he knew what he wanted. That wasn't really the problem. The problem was that he'd always assumed he knew how to achieve what he wanted, too, and now Harry had asked him, and Draco found himself standing amid the wrecks of ideas and plans and dreams that were supposed to have given him wings, and found himself severely embarrassed.

What was he supposed to do?

He didn't know.

He had the ideas—be rich and famous and respected, keep Harry at his side and in his life, invent new spells, avoid actually working for a living. But he realized now that he didn't know how he would achieve any fame and respect on his own that didn't come reflected from Harry or his father, or hold a place in Harry's life if Harry grew this profoundly irritated with him all the time, or keep going with spells when he seemed to invent them and then not pay any more attention to them, or avoid just lounging around on the Malfoy fortune.

He kept asking himself the question, and he kept not having an answer.

Well, then, perhaps he should ask himself what answers would definitely not do.

He couldn't be what his father had been. Draco enjoyed playing politics, but he couldn't hold himself as distant from his machinations as his father had always done—he did things out of rage and hatred as well as for advantage—and he couldn't do them for the same ideals. Draco had to admit that he still thought Muggleborns weren't as powerful or magically talented or skilled as purebloods, but the thought of killing, say, Granger left him physically sick. If purebloods

really wanted their children to grow up desiring to kill Muggleborns, he thought, then they shouldn't make them go to school with them. (Not for the first time, he wondered if a motive like that was behind his mother's insistence on sending him to Hogwarts and not Durmstrang). No, he wasn't a Death Eater, and he couldn't follow even the more limited versions of that path that might be left after Voldemort was gone.

He couldn't expect to gain fame from his spells if he just invented them and then never did anything with them. He would have to introduce them to the public if he wanted credit. Draco bit his lip, and wondered if insisting that people pay money to use or learn his spells was too much like working for a living.

He couldn't give up Harry. The mere thought of doing so caused a bottomless pit to open in his stomach. No, he had to have Harry in his life.

But it looked like he would have to have him differently. He wasn't an obedient little pet on a leash—and neither was Harry.

Did I do what he says I did? Did I really expect him to adopt the pureblood ideas about Muggleborns someday?

Draco could feel heat stinging his cheeks. Yes, he had. It was always unpleasant, and dangerous, to turn a corner in one's mind and come face to face with something he'd never known he believed. What would his father say?

Yes. I thought he'd be more like me. Why not? He's a Slytherin, and he'd been so badly abused by his family that I thought he wouldn't love what they did. I thought he'd become more ambitious, more willing to play politics, Darker, more willing to see that Muggleborns don't fit well into wizarding culture, more willing to—Merlin, did I really think that he'd come to agree that house elves needed to be servants, because we can't get along without them?

Merlin, he was right. I did really think he would betray everything he was.

Draco rolled over and buried his head in his pillow. The coolness of the cloth helped muffle the heat of embarrassment in his face. He lay there for a moment longer, until he took a great, gasping breath and sat up.

All right. I know a few things I can do, after all. I was putting off doing them, and I shouldn't have.

But the best of those plans, the most likely to succeed, would also put Draco directly in the path of an enemy as formidable as Harry when he was angry, so Draco determined to wait and see if it was necessary.

And how am I going to do that?

See what Harry was doing today, of course—have an idea of what he was like when Draco wasn't with him. After all, those actions might suggest a plan on their own, and if Draco learned that his other, risky plan wouldn't help after all, there was no need to pursue it.

Coward, his conscience accused him, in a voice that sounded much like Harry's.

Slytherin, Draco argued back as he cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself. Not Gryffindor. Survivor.

His conscience sneered at him, as if it didn't buy his excuses. Draco, still reeling from the revelation that he really had expected Harry to accept most wizards' need of house elves, didn't have much of a defense.

Draco watched as Harry determinedly approached the Weasley twins at lunch. So far, he hadn't done anything remarkable, just attended classes, but Draco had the feeling that he was about to do something now.

Watching Harry this way was both intrusive—Harry gave no sign of suspecting he was there, so Draco did feel a bit like a voyeur, or an enemy—and enlightening. Draco saw all sorts of little shards of expression on his face that he'd never noticed before. He'd realized

that Harry and Pansy had somewhat made up their argument from earlier in the year, and even talked softly as they walked from one class to another. He'd seen the rapt expression on his face in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and realized with a start that Harry really did enjoy the theory behind the class that Professor Merryweather explained to them, while Draco would have preferred more spells. He'd noticed that Harry resolutely ignored the Ravenclaws he passed in the halls, except for Loony, Chang, Padma Patil, and Isabell Neelda. His greetings to them were incredibly warm.

He does have a life apart from me, even when we're together. And I never noticed.

So far, though, nothing he'd seen had made him sure that he had to pursue his risky plan. Draco gnawed his lip as he stepped between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables, far enough back from the benches that no one should bump him accidentally, but close enough to hear what Harry was saying to the Weasleys. Perhaps he should do something else, after all.

"Fred," Harry said, "and George."

The twin on the right, addressed as George, lifted his eyes and laughed. "Poor ickle Harry-kins," he said. "I'm—"

"Fred," said the other. "And I'm George. Or perhaps it's the other way around. You'd never—"

"Know, would you?" the other said, and both of them grinned, reminding Draco of just how much he loathed Weasleys. That was another thing he and Harry didn't have in common, by the way Harry grinned back.

"I wanted to ask you something," said Harry. "Bear in mind that this is purely hypothetical. I wouldn't want you to think it was real." He braced his hand on the Gryffindor table and leaned towards them. "Would you want to open up a shop to distribute your jokes someday?"

Two identical Weasley mouths fell open. Draco took another step closer, mouth full of his beating heart. He can't actually be doing what I think he's doing, right? Please let him not be doing what I think he's doing.

"Yes!" said the one who'd claimed to be Fred, at last. "It's only our—"

"Lifelong dream, Harry," the other finished. "We tried to distribute order forms last summer, but Mum—"

"Got in the way and made us get rid of them," said maybe-Fred, gloomily. "The main problem is that we just don't have enough money, mate. We'd need enough to establish the shop, to distribute the order forms, to advertise in the Prophet, to buy ingredients for the test products."

Harry was nodding along in sympathy. People watched him witlessly all along the Gryffindor table, except for his brother, who was grinning maniacally. "I know," he said. "It's hard, it really is, for young entrepreneurs to make their way in the world today. How much do you think you'd need? You know, tops?"

"A thousand Galleons," said maybe-George.

"That'd make us comfortable," said his twin. "And cover the expenses for the first year and a half, at least." He shook off his gloom with an obvious physical effort and straightened, clasping his hand to his heart. "But tell me, O Great and Glorious Defeater of Dumbledore, where we can get a thousand Galleons, and I promise that we'll be your slaves for life."

Harry grinned, and looked over his shoulder. Three enormous birds came through the Hall windows in the next moment; Draco thought they were gyrfalcons. They labored along under the weight of a trunk with the Gringotts seal on it. Draco recognized that kind of dark wooden trunk; his father had had one during a year when he'd done a lot of intense bribery in the Ministry. It would open a hole to the appropriate vault in Gringotts, and money would flow from the vault into the trunk, until its owner had the required amount and said to stop.

How can he do this? It's not like he has the Potter vault any more—

And then it hit Draco. The Black vaults, of course. Harry would have access to them now.

And Regulus Black was such a joker that he'd probably approved this.

Draco fumed under his breath as he watched the gyrfalcons land in front of the astonished twins. Harry laughed as he threw open the lid, and Galleons shimmered in the light of the Great Hall. It was obvious that he'd planned this to happen at lunch so he'd have the largest audience possible. Draco studied the unfeigned pleasure gleaming in Harry's eyes, the sly smile on his face as he watched people watching him, and shook his head. Harry—this is the kind of thing Harry uses money for. To make other people happy.

Doesn't he know that there are better things to do with it!

"A thousand Galleons," Harry told the trunk, and it shuddered a little and appeared to grow. Some of the coins spilled over the rim. Harry nodded to the still-astonished Fred and George. "Finite Incantatem. There you are. The hole in the bottom's closed now, so it's just an ordinary trunk." And, indeed, Draco could see the Gringotts seal on the trunk's tilted-back lid fading. "And all yours, to establish a joke shop with. We'll skip the part about your being my slaves for life, since, after all, I think it's much more entertaining to watch you sit here with your mouths hanging open. Now I can tell you apart by how many teeth you each have."

The twins slammed their mouths shut. One of them hovered over the trunk as if to guard it from reaching Gryffindor hands—their brother and sister would probably try to take the money to buy new dress robes, Draco thought spitefully—while the other leaped across the table and prostrated himself at Harry's feet.

"A thousand, thousand thanks is not enough for your generosity, grand sir!" he declaimed. Harry laughed. Draco regretted that he was facing away at the moment, so that Draco couldn't see the way his eyes shone, the way they always shone, when he laughed. "The first

of the Weasley's Wizard Wheezes shall be named after our patron Harry, yea, indeed they shall, and verily, he shall receive free jokes and gifts whenever he wishes them, and the right to inspect our shop at any hour of the day or night, forsooth, and the first of our children shall bear his name, but this is not enough to do him honor!"

Harry was by now laughing so hard he almost couldn't stand. Then he straightened, and announced to the people who were gaping at him, "Oh, by the way, I became Black heir last night." Then he turned to face the head table, where all the teachers were staring at him in absolute astonishment—but apparently, except for Snape, enjoying the performance too much to put a stop to it.

That meant he wasn't watching the faces of the other students. But Draco was, and he saw the effect Harry's casual bit of information had on them. Their faces rippled like water in a pond, and so did their emotions. But then they settled, and except for envy, the most prominent emotion was—

Desire. Longing.

Draco didn't understand it, until he realized that not only had the other students just heard Harry announce that he was fabulously wealthy and the heir to an ancient pureblood name, but they'd seen him laughing, and seen how beautiful he was when he laughed. Pureblood students from all the Houses whom Draco knew had only looked at Harry when he had his name in the Prophet for something were staring at him with steady looks of appreciation now. The little Weasley tart had her eyebrows raised. Draco heard a seventh-year Hufflepuff girl breathe, "Well. Not much I couldn't get used to with that, even the missing hand," and saw her companion nod fervent agreement.

They could talk to Harry until their faces turned blue, Draco thought spitefully, and he'd probably never notice. He was oblivious to things like that.

Yes, oblivious. And oblivious to most of the pureblood marriage and courtship rituals, too. Someone could court him under the guise of helping him politically, and the git would never know, never realize,

the true motive. There had been a few cases in the past of prominent leaders being tricked into marriage or joining that way, especially if they'd been raised in isolation from the rest of the wizarding world and were told that completing a certain ritual was the only way to achieve their goals.

And as Harry got more involved in politics, now that he was Black heir and had the money and extra political clout to do so, it wasn't just the other students at Hogwarts who would have the chance to see him laughing.

A vision rose in Draco's mind, of a future in which Harry swore an oath or completed a ritual he didn't understand and found himself joined or married to another family. Harry might even accept it, especially since for so long, he'd thought of his future life only in terms of duty and war. And if by that time he and Draco had parted ways over this argument or some other stupid fight—

It was a horrible vision. It made Draco physically sick. He rejected it, and watched intently as Harry nodded to, of all people, Remus Lupin. The werewolf looked surprised, but nodded back.

"There should be a bird coming for you," said Harry. "Right about—ah, now."

An owl, this time, circled through the window, and bore straight for Lupin. Lupin gave Harry a quizzical look, but opened the letter the owl carried. The next moment, his face paled, and he looked up and shook his head at Harry.

"I can't accept this," he said.

"Yes, you can," Harry said calmly.

"It's against the law," Lupin said, frowning. "Werewolves aren't supposed to have accounts with Gringotts."

Harry tilted his head and winked. "And there aren't supposed to be loopholes in the laws that will let the heir to a sufficiently ancient pureblood line establish one for anyone he likes, but there you are,"

he said. "And do you know, not one goblin at Gringotts ever raised any objections? I'm not sure why that is." He was radiating innocence. Draco, who remembered the ritual last year in which they'd freed the Gringotts goblins, was very sure. "I checked and triple-checked the laws with Regulus Black last night. There's no way that anyone can take that account away from you, Professor Lupin. The Ministry tries, and they run into a thousand years of iron-clad tradition and laws piled on top of laws—and goblin law, as well as wizard law, holding things in place."

Lupin still looked gobsmacked, but he nodded, slowly. "Thank you, Harry," he said. "I—thank you."

"I'm not quite done yet," said Harry, and pulled a knife from his pocket. Draco saw some students gasp and flinch away, but those were mostly the Muggleborns. The purebloods leaned forward. They knew an oath-taking knife when they saw one. The distinctive diamond edges against the steel shone in the January sunlight.

"I hereby swear," said Harry, "by the blood that runs in my veins and by the blood I have inherited to, that I will fight for the rights of werewolves until I have changed the laws concerning them to the same laws that protect other wizards." The oath-taking knife flashed and cut deep down the center of Harry's left arm.

Draco felt the magic take hold. Harry's blood rose into the air as a mist of light, both red and stained with silver as it formed the crest of the Most Noble and Ancient House of Black above his head. Harry looked up at this with a calm expression, as if it were nothing very noteworthy. The red blood, now turned entirely silver, foamed along beneath the crest into lettering: *Toujours pur*, always pure, the motto of the Blacks.

Not now, Draco thought, a bit hysterical. Now it's something better than pure.

The crest and the lettering lost their form after ten heartbeats—the traditional pause, to let everyone present witness it—and fell back on Harry like molten rain. Silver melted into his hair, his arms, his shoulders, his face. Harry stood still under the rain, as he had to.

That would insure he kept the oath, Draco knew. If he broke it, the ancient magic would turn the blood in his veins to molten silver.

Harry bowed to Lupin, then turned and walked back to the Slytherin table as if nothing had happened. He left behind a terribly changed and charged atmosphere, of course, and Draco didn't have to look at Lupin's shocked, stunned, slightly teary face to know that. He'd just flung a declaration of war in the direction of those who opposed giving werewolves equal rights to wizards, and, for those slightly more alert, in the direction of those who valued some pureblood families less than others because of their lack of money.

And Draco could see other people accepting that. There was little most wizards wouldn't accept, even opposing politics, or ones that challenged ancient prejudices, for the chance to work with or otherwise secure someone like Harry to the family. Magical power was one thing, but there were people who wouldn't follow Voldemort just because he was powerful. Now Harry had shown he had wealth, and the obvious willingness to follow the most ancient pureblood traditions in at least some matters, and determination like a hurricane, and adaptability, the quality that so often made the difference in wizarding duels and on battlefields, the quickness to roll from one spell to the next and become what one needed to become to survive. Harry had shown that in the way he used an ancient oath to swear something quite new.

And beauty. Can't forget the beauty.

Combine that with the fact that Harry had announced he was Black heir, but not that he'd taken the Black name, and there were even more people who would see him as—not vulnerable, exactly, but free for the taking, if they could just coax or persuade him into joining their cause.

And Draco knew his risky plan was necessary, after all. It was absolutely intolerable, the idea that someone else would win Harry. He had to be free to make Harry an offer, and, if Harry would accept it, to show everyone else that he was committed to Harry beyond tearing away. Only the deepest and most sacred of the courting

rituals would do, the one that took three years to complete, and involved twelve rituals, four for each year, and took and gave equally from and to both beloved and lover.

And the one that only a magical heir of the family could offer.

Lucius had so far refused to actually confirm Draco as the Malfoy magical heir, for many reasons, starting with his disobedience in attending Walpurgis Night last year and continuing from there. His latest letters were filled with hints that he didn't approve of the way Draco and Harry's relationship was going. He wouldn't confirm Draco as magical heir, and doubly so, if he knew the reason Draco wanted the confirmation.

But Draco was now determined that there was nothing he would not do to have Harry, including adapting his beliefs and expectations, and facing the old dragon in his den.

He would have to go have a little talk with Lucius Malfoy.

Chapter Sixty-Five: Lucius and Draco

Lucius permitted himself a single cold smile as he folded the letter. Yes, it made sense that the family of the Death Eater who'd hurt his wife had hidden themselves thoroughly the moment tidings of the battle on the equinox came to them. They would have known that, even dead, their son had made the rest of them targets of an angry Malfoy. That was why it had taken his people so long to find them. But they'd been located now, huddling in a tiny house in Finland, and Lucius had only to contact someone who could study the house thoroughly, then create a Portkey for it and send it to him at the Manor.

Of course, he hadn't yet decided on which of several spells he wanted to use on that family. He had pulled books from the shelves, but as time passed and the prey proved harder and harder to locate, Lucius's estimate of how much they needed to pay for hurting his wife had risen. The first three tomes he had looked through were not painful enough. He reached for a book that had no title, but which every Malfoy worth his blood had looked through by the time he was fourteen or so. Lucius had done that, and so had his father.

Draco did not.

Lucius felt his mouth tighten, and shook his head. It was unworthy of him to let thoughts of his son disturb his pleasure in vengeance. Abraxas, his father, would have put the thoughts aside in a moment, opened the book, and learned the spells. Then he would have turned his attention to writing a letter to make sure his son obeyed him.

Of course, Abraxas had never had the same problems with Lucius that Lucius did with Draco. Lucius had been trained in the dances, and how to be a worthy heir, from the time he was three years old. With Draco, Lucius hadn't begun training him properly until he was seven. Part of that was at Narcissa's insistence—she claimed they had to wait and be sure that Draco was psychologically normal, that he hadn't inherited the Black madness—but Lucius knew some of it was his own fault, too, his own leniency.

And he had a son who was weak because of it, far too inclined to share his emotions with the world, and involved in choosing a partner that he actually seemed to need, rather than, as Lucius and Narcissa had done, making the choice because each one of them wanted the other.

Enough. I said that I would not think about him now.

He flicked the titleless book open to a page he knew well, but which nevertheless changed every time he read it. The writing had powerful spells covering the description of other spells, so that Lucius, depending on his mood, would find more painful Dark Arts written there when he wanted to cause pain, more complicated incantations when he wanted a challenge.

He'd just started to read the description of a spell that promised to split the victim's body in half and then heal it again without killing them when he heard a short trill of phoenix song. Lucius turned his head inch by inch, eyes narrowed. That bloody communication spell that Rosier-Henlin had invented was a nuisance, and were it not for the fact that it had great advantages in battle, Lucius would have refused to let it be cast on him.

"Father," said Draco's voice a moment later from his wrist. "I need to speak to you. May I Floo home in half an hour?"

Lucius felt his eyebrows rise. It was Tuesday, and Draco should have been in class. "Speak to me on what matter, Draco?" he asked.

There was a pause, and then his son's voice spoke, not trembling, though Lucius thought it would. "I think it's a matter that both of us need to hear me speak of face-to-face," he said. "If that is well with you, Father."

Lucius bared his teeth. So it comes to this. Well. He had thought that his disapproving letters would sting Draco into a confrontation at some point. He had simply expected it to come in the form of a whiny, sulky letter, at which point he could chide Draco for exposing their family's private affairs to the posts. For Draco to risk facing him like this was unusual, but not so unpredictable. It only meant he would

crash into the floor much harder than he would by letter. Lucius knew his son, and he knew that Draco was not his equal, and he knew that Draco thought he was. “Come ahead, Draco,” he said smoothly. “I will be in my library when you arrive.”

“Thank you, Father.”

His voice died, and Lucius knew the communication spell had ended. He put the book down and strode briskly from the library, finding Narcissa in the small blue antechamber she favored on the second floor of the Manor. She put down the letter she’d been writing and raised her eyebrows at him.

Lucius bent, kissed her once, and then said, “Draco is coming home to face me. I request and require that you stay out of this, my love. Draco has some hard lessons to learn.”

As he expected, Narcissa’s face went pale—she had been hoping that Draco would grow for a few more years before he tried this, Lucius knew; she understood their son’s weaknesses as well as he did, though she termed them strengths—but she nodded. She knew that Draco was more Malfoy than Black, and besides, he bore Lucius’s name and was heir to Lucius’s fortune and house and land. If he had been a Black, then he would have had to face her at some point. “Very well, Lucius,” she whispered. “I will remove to the third floor.” She picked up her parchment and quill. Lucius observed indulgently that her hands shook. Well, she was a fond mother, and Draco was her only child, and this was the first time he had decided on facing his father. When the second time came—as the second time would have to come, because Lucius would defeat his son in this one—she would be composed and calm.

As she was about to step out of the room, he caught a glimpse of the letter she was writing, and frowned inquiringly at her. Narcissa nodded to him. “No book in the libraries portrays the consequences of a broken threefold oath clearly,” she said. “I am writing to the healers at St. Mungo’s, from behind my Gillyflower persona, to ask what they know of it.”

Lucius felt his mouth tighten again. He could hardly think of Harry without contempt, either, lately. Narcissa had told him that Harry had become heir to the Black fortune last night, and before that, he had caused the oath to recoil upon Narcissa by killing Bellatrix. The boy meant well, but he was too young for the kind of power he wielded. Lucius had started thinking he was strong enough to bear it after their battle for Woodhouse, and again after the death of his phoenix at Midwinter, but his opinion was declining again.

“Good luck to you in finding the truth,” he told Narcissa, knowing that the fact he bothered to say the words at all would tell his wife how sincerely he meant them.

Narcissa held his eyes, the strong woman he loved again, and not the mother who had just learned that her son was coming home to face his father. “I will do more than find the truth,” she said. “I will confront it.”

Lucius nodded approvingly, and moved aside so she could go upstairs. Then he returned to his own library, glancing at the clock above the fireplace. It was twenty minutes until Draco would arrive home.

He could think of his son without resentment now, even with a little pride. Draco was following a family tradition, one that relatively few purebloods still preserved; it was kept so private that the Malfoy confrontations were the only unbroken line Lucius knew of in the last hundred years. (It was possible that it might have happened in the Black family as well, but Lucius didn't know if he could count Sirius Black's confrontation with his parents at sixteen, which had resulted in the absolute breaking of both his parents and Sirius's running away and disowning, as one or not). It had been far more common in the old days when most pureblood patriarchs or matriarchs still controlled their families almost completely, when it had been common to weave spells around the cradles to make a child's disobedience impossible for the first ten years of his or her life. At a certain point, the spells, placed when the heir was so young, would weaken, and the family head would see how long it took the child to notice and come to face them. It might take multiple confrontations, but ultimately the child would win and prove himself or herself worthy—or be rejected, and

another child chosen or adopted as heir. In the very oldest traditions, the child had killed the family head, and so power had passed, or been killed in the rejection.

Lucius wrinkled his nose. That was a barbaric practice, the way Light purebloods thought of Dark inheritance practices in general. In the centuries when wizarding families still had children regularly dying before they reached ten years old, poisoned by powerful Dark artifacts or by their enemies, killing one's potential heir was a waste. The Malfoys had been one of the first families to adopt a different sort of confrontation, to see if the heir could make the family head respect him and declare him worthy.

Lucius had won his first confrontation with his father at sixteen—a good thing, because Abraxas had died of dragon pox the next year. Lucius had been ready, calmly, to take control of the family at the same time as he was initiated as a Death Eater.

And now Draco, callow and even younger than Lucius had been, not trained in the same way and far too emotional, imagined that he could face his father and win.

It was almost...charming, really.

Narcissa tried, but she couldn't write. She put down the quill and looked out the window at the sky. She felt nerveless, but no tears would come. She was not quite so abandoned to propriety as to weep, especially when the confrontation hadn't even begun yet and she didn't know what the consequences to her son would be.

She hoped it would not come to spells. Lucius was more than Draco's equal there, and he would not hesitate to use spells that affected Draco quite severely—perhaps ones that would change his memories, or even deage him a year. Narcissa knew Lucius's father had been prepared to use such a spell on him. Lucius loved Draco, but it was a fierce love, not a comfortable one. In the name of making his heir stronger, he would do something that might make Draco incredibly angry when he learned of it, so that Draco's fury would give him a better chance of winning his second confrontation with Lucius, and ultimately strengthening the Malfoy family.

Narcissa wondered when she had stopped believing that the survival of the family was more important than the survival of any one specific individual. Perhaps when one of her sisters turned out to have inherited the Black madness and the other ran away to marry Ted Tonks, she thought. Or perhaps the night that Sirius rose against his parents in revolt, and Narcissa had gone to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place see Aunt Capella screaming in mute, helpless pain, her brain wracked by contrasting compulsions that she could neither obey nor disobey. That wouldn't have happened had his parents not tried to make Sirius into the perfect model of the Black heir—had they not been so horribly afraid of his compulsion gift, so much stronger than their own. For that matter, Narcissa wondered what would have happened had her own mother done something besides simply accept that Bella's madness was incurable, or that Andromeda was irredeemable because she had first resisted the pureblood dances when she was eight—done something besides pin all her hopes on Narcissa to carry her family's future.

If you believed that in truth, her conscience whispered at her, you would go down there and stop this confrontation.

But she could not. If she had married someone with the last name of Black, she would have the right to interfere. But both Lucius and Draco were Malfoy by blood, not just name, and Narcissa could no more step into this testing than she could observe the ritual that would mark Draco as the Malfoy magical heir—if Lucius ever performed it.

So perhaps she did believe that family was more important than one specific individual, after all.

Or perhaps she simply mistrusted her judgment sharply, after realizing how much her broken oath could cost her and how much of the cost would be her own fault, and knew that neither her husband nor her son would thank her for the interference.

Restlessly, she put aside the letter to St. Mungo's, and began working on one to Harry instead. She still blamed him somewhat, but

she didn't blame him as much as she had before, and she wanted to say that, and the mixed emotions suited her mood at the moment.

She felt the flare of the Floo downstairs a few moments later. Draco had arrived.

Draco stepped out into the antechamber and handed his formal cloak to the house elves. In reality, he hadn't had much reason to wear a formal cloak, but he'd known that things had to be done properly, and so he'd changed into the kind of simple, elegant clothes his father would have expected to see him wearing if he'd just come home from a long journey.

He hesitated a moment, drawing up his courage and breathing it in great, rolling puffs of freezing air through himself. For a Gryffindor, maybe, courage was symbolized by fire and a hot temper. Not for a Malfoy. A Malfoy's courage was ice, the deep ice of the south, which never melted and never cracked no matter what the pressure of the sun. When Draco stepped forward again, he was calm, and cold, and as ready as he would ever be.

He moved through the house in a surreal state. It wasn't far from the fireplace he'd come through to his father's library, but it seemed to take hours to walk the distance. The walls bent and warped around him. Draco could feel his own fear struggling beneath the ice of his composure like a trapped seal.

And I think that Father is unbalancing me on purpose.

Draco narrowed his eyes. He touched his wand, resting in his robe pocket, and whispered, "Finite Incantatem," under his breath. The odd stretching sensation vanished, and the walls went back to their normal places. Draco snorted lightly, and wondered if this was a spell that Lucius had cast to test him, or one in place on the Manor walls, prepared to spring into motion when any heir came to face the head of his or her family. Draco wouldn't have put it past his father, who had said much in his recent letters about how Draco was too weak, and too disobedient.

Does he think that obeying him will make me strong?

But Draco knew the channels his father's thinking ran in, like deep, icy rivers. An heir was supposed to gather strength in silence, in quiet, obeying faultlessly until the moment he was ready for the challenge of asserting his own will. Draco had not shown, at least to his father, that he had the necessary strength, and he had disobeyed him in several matters, large and small, since Walpurgis Night.

Lucius's latest letter had contained the sentence: I find myself wondering if you are a true Malfoy, Draco, given how you have done many things that are unworthy of us.

Draco knew he wasn't accusing Narcissa of infidelity. But Lucius could doubt Draco's fitness all he liked, and would, until Draco proved himself worthy. Lucius loved him, Draco knew, but it was love as high and cold and lofty as an eagle's love for the air—love like an iron fist. And he had done the best he could, and Draco had still turned out—the way he turned out.

I'm half Black, too, though. And the Blacks have—not weakness, but a different kind of strength.

Draco halted outside the door of his father's library. He envisioned to himself why he was doing this. For a moment, he had thought of only speaking the reasons his father would want to hear, but no, that was false, to both himself and his purposes. He was going to win this confrontation with what he was, not an icy mask. Besides, Lucius would be perfectly within his rights to disinherit Draco if he found out later that his son had won through a trick, or lied about his purposes in demanding to be made Malfoy magical heir; he had told Draco often enough about what happened to heirs who used compulsion or subtle spells to cheat their parents into giving them their legacy.

This is probably one of the few points in his life where my father values honesty, Draco reflected, as he gathered all his strength. He's opaque the rest of the time. But today, I get to see the real Lucius Malfoy, as much as he gets to see the real Draco.

The idea made a frisson of excitement run through him. He reached out and rapped firmly on the library door.

His father's voice answered, absolutely calm and absolutely level. "Come in, my son."

Draco opened the door and stepped into the confrontation. Lucius turned and regarded Draco. He noted with distant approval that Draco wore the fine shirt and trousers of a well-traveled heir returning from a journey, not his school uniform. He would not have put it past Draco to come in like that, despite all his own training, and Narcissa's.

"Close the door, and sit down," he said, the first of many tests. Whether Draco obeyed or not, that would tell Lucius something about what he was here for.

Draco shut the door, but did not sit down. "I would rather face you on my feet, Father," he said.

Lucius nodded. This confrontation would likely be short. Draco was too raw, too open, and didn't trust himself enough to sit down while Lucius remained standing, as of course he would. There were cracks in his composure already. "Of course, Draco. Tell me why you came." Those words would have begun the ancient ritual among the old wizarding families, the one where only one wizard or witch would leave that room alive. Abraxas had used the same words to him, though they had not designed to kill each other. And Lucius had given the proper ritual response. He hoped Draco would.

"I want you to make me Malfoy magical heir," said Draco bluntly.

Lucius concealed a sigh. Well, there will be other times. When he faces me again, perhaps he will use the words. "I will not do that," he said. "And you know why not. I have my purposes answered in you remaining as you are. You are not strong enough or worthy enough of the title."

Draco lifted his head as if hearing a distant horn call. Lucius didn't know what to call the expression that came over his face next, except weakness. He was not closed enough. "I have inherited a magical gift

from Julia Malfoy,” he said. “I went through the ritual to summon her, and she gave me her gift of empathy. You know that. You watched the scene in the Pensieve this past summer.”

Lucius nodded again. “And again I say, you are not strong enough or worthy enough of the title,” he murmured. “The gift of empathy will prevent you from ever Declaring for Dark, Draco. It has made you weak, made you show your emotions more frequently and more often. And while it might be considered a technical inheritance from the Malfoy family, since you did receive it directly from a Malfoy ancestor, that does not mean I need make you my magical heir.”

“I’m not your magical heir,” said Draco steadily. “I know I’m not. Your soul and mine don’t resonate, Father.”

“With as weak as you are, I would be worried if they did,” Lucius shot back, and waited to see if that would break his son.

Draco’s lip curled. A most peculiar look came into his eyes. “How old were you the first time you cast the Killing Curse, Father?”

“Seventeen,” said Lucius. “During my initiation into the Dark Lord’s ranks. You know this, Draco.”

“I was fifteen.” Draco took a step forward. “I cast it on that werewolf, Greyback’s mate, in the Woodhouse battle. I did it a full two years younger than you, Father. I found and summoned the hatred and the strength to do so, and survive. Will you still say that I am weak, Lucius?”

Not bad, Lucius thought. Draco was testing him now, calling him by his name, and bringing up a comparison in which Lucius might suffer, if not for other, contrasting circumstances. But he was still going to lose.

“Yes, I will,” said Lucius. “For this reason. I completed my initiation and accepted it as the Dark Lord purposed that I should do. You needed comfort, Draco. I saw your face afterwards. You did not accept the Killing Curse as something justified, a spell that you always knew you would need to cast. You collapsed into your

boyfriend's arms as soon as we were away from Hogwarts, I trust?" He kept his tone coolly inquiring.

Draco laughed, a sound like lightning. "Lucius, do you still think that bowing to Voldemort made you strong?"

Lucius stiffened. Of all the topics he had thought Draco might bring up in this confrontation, he had not realized he would dare to touch on Lucius's days as a Death Eater.

"Careful, my son," he said, feeling freezing anger spread over him, and self-resentment that he had shown even that faint sign of his shock in the rigidity of his muscles. "Oh, be careful. I accepted the role of lieutenant to the most powerful Dark Lord the world has seen in generations. He was stronger than Grindelwald, and more successful. The Malfoys have followed Dark Lords when they appeared, save for those times when a Lord-level wizard appeared among their own family. I held a position that did me honor. You will not dare to cast aspersions on it."

"Oh, but I can, and I will," said Draco, moving a step forward. "If it did you such honor, Lucius, why not hold to your loyalty to him, the way that Aunt Bella did, and go to Azkaban for his sake? Instead, you pretended that you'd been under the Imperius Curse the entire time. You told me that as I grew up, too, and it took Harry persuading me that you'd been a willing Death Eater to make me see sense. So, you see, I never believed that you were an honorable follower of the Dark Lord. First I thought you were a victim, and now I'm just disgusted at the contradiction."

Lucius found it hard to breathe for a moment. Then he snapped his teeth, and said, "Malfoys have always adapted, always survived. I did what I had to do to remain alive and free. The lesser wizards are jealous of us, Draco. I would have been Kissed by Dementors, not merely sent to Azkaban, if they had believed I was a willing Death Eater."

"And you could have told me that story, and I would have accepted it," said Draco. "Why did you tell me that you were a victim, though, Lucius? Why did you want your son to believe that?" He tilted his

head to the side, a gesture that Lucius knew he'd inherited, or copied, from Narcissa. "Could it be that you didn't want me to know that you'd tortured children? Killed a family that included a baby, instead of just taking out the one Bones wizard dangerous to you? Could it be that you were ashamed?"

"You would have betrayed the secret," Lucius said between gritted teeth. And when had that happened? He forced his jaw to relax. "Children will chatter. I wished to keep the story consistent."

"I never chattered, and you know that very well," Draco said.

"You were a spoiled, indulged child, Draco, and you would have told someone else the secret to make you seem more important than you were," Lucius snapped. "And yes, I do affix a large portion of the blame to myself for making you that way."

Draco chuckled at him, and Lucius was reminded of his father's laugh. He narrowed his eyes. He had seen little of Abraxas in Draco before. Where had this piece come from?

Of course. He's been keeping some of his strength hidden.

But that clashed with what Lucius knew of Draco—that he was too open, too vulnerable, too weak, to inherit as Malfoy magical heir, though Lucius had no other choice for a blood heir. This strength was a contradiction to everything Draco had shown so far.

Which means that this is the mask. I need only strike back strongly enough, and it will shatter.

Draco was surprised at how easy it was to drive his father in circles. Did Lucius really think he'd learned nothing from him? Draco had been Sorted into Slytherin for a reason. Just because he'd never said these things didn't mean he'd never thought them. He had, and sometimes he had felt a festering discontent when he looked at his father, but love and pragmatism both had kept him quiet.

He watched his father's face, though, and saw determination there, as if Lucius was settling back on his haunches. He decided that

Lucius had had a chance to get used to this tactic, and was getting ready to strike back.

Draco braced himself in turn, and called up every bit of determination, every reason he was doing this, and put them all together into a great wall, solid as a mountain, that his father would not destroy no matter how hard he tried.

And he did try.

"You are a spoiled child, Draco," said Lucius, his tone as fatherly as it ever got. "You are too young for such a responsibility as you demand from me. Even your means of asking shows it. Tell me, Draco: why are you doing this?"

Draco held his eyes. "Because I want to," he said. "Because my gift of empathy has changed, and it's now the ability to possess people." He paused to watch and enjoy as shock flooded Lucius's face, however briefly. "That means that I can Declare Dark if I wish. And I know that possession also has flourished in the Malfoy line, once or twice, so I am still the inheritor of the magic of my family."

"You have not inherited the magic of your ancestors directly," said Lucius. "And you are still not my magical heir."

Draco sneered at him. "And I know that that doesn't matter, Lucius," he said. "There are rituals that will allow a wizard to transfer his powers to another wizard on his death, if he really wishes to. It happens automatically with a magical heir, but that doesn't make it better. Why should it? You make the confirmation, and, if you wish to, arrange the ritual, and then I will be your magical heir in truth, whenever you die. I hope that won't be for some decades, by the way," he added. "I want you alive to see what I achieve, and to see me surpass you."

He had to hold back his laughter as he watched Lucius's face change again. He would wager his love for Harry that his father was trying to reconcile what he knew of Draco with the words coming out of Draco's mouth, which sounded like calculated, guided insults, and failing.

What he doesn't know is that this is me, Draco exulted. Fashioning insults on the fly is something I'm good at, like spells. Just because he has to plan out what he says in advance doesn't mean I do.

"Such rituals are ugly and barbaric," Lucius began, "and no one in the Malfoy family has used them for thirteen generations."

Draco shrugged. "Because we were lucky enough to have an unbroken line of magical heirs, and all our powers could transfer automatically," he said. "Besides, what happened in that fourteenth generation back? Someone used one, didn't he? And it was for the family's sake, so that we could adapt and survive. Why are you so reluctant to confirm me as your magical heir now, Lucius? Adapt and survive. You want a magical heir. I want to be one. We both win."

"I will not use it," Lucius spat. "I will not use one of those rituals."

Draco shrugged again.

"And stop that," said Lucius. "That is a peasant gesture."

"I've seen you shrug, you know, Lucius," Draco sniped back. "You're not convincing." His mind was filled with memories his father certainly wouldn't want him thinking—not only of the shrugging, but of the fact that he had outdanced his father when he was twelve years old, when he found out that Lucius had been the one who gave Riddle's possessed diary to Harry. Memory sparked inspiration, and he crafted another insult. "Nor are you currently convincing in your role as guardian of the family honor," he added. "Of course, you lost your grip on that three years ago, didn't you?"

Once again, the shot went home, and Lucius's lips clamped shut so tightly that Draco almost thought he would draw blood from that alone. He kept his exultation off his face, mostly, limiting himself to a mocking lift of his eyebrows. Really, why was this so easy?

Because my father underestimated me. Badly. He judged me by himself. Draco thought of some of the comments Lucius had made in his letters to Draco, that he thought badly of the way Draco acted

around Harry because it was not the way Lucius acted around Narcissa. He only loves two people, my mother and me, and he's blind to other forms of love.

He's blind even to the fact that I might love differently than he does. And at the same time, thinking differently about that would mean doubting his own judgment, which he almost never does. He's bound himself in chains of certainty. Not so flexible and adaptable, after all.

"I need only refuse to make you magical heir," said Lucius, very softly, "and there is nothing that you can do about it."

"Oh, yes, there is," said Draco.

"What, then?"

Draco cocked his head. "Well, I will give you a partial list, since I don't want to reveal all my tactics to an enemy," he said. "But here it is. I can reveal our family troubles to the Daily Prophet, and tell them the real reasons that you won't make me magical heir. I can refuse to become your blood heir unless you make me magical heir, and give you no one to leave anything to." He smiled at Lucius, as if he were seriously considering the next tactic he named. "I can possess you and force you to confirm me, and then your pride would prevent you from taking the confirmation back."

Lucius's whole face was pale now. "Someone would know," he said.

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Do you really understand what I mean when I talk about having possession, Lucius? It's not like the Imperius Curse. I move with your body, gesture with your hands, and speak with your voice, while you're trapped in a corner of your mind, helpless to intervene. And I possessed Dumbledore, and held him." Lucius did not need to know how short the time had been. "I think it would be much harder to detect than the Imperius Curse, really, and I'm damn sure that there are no laws saying that it's illegal to possess your father and force him to confirm you as magical heir. The possession gift is too rare."

“This is about your boyfriend.” Lucius’s voice was low, and ugly, and Draco understood that he had broken through his father’s stubbornness at last, and was seeing the honesty he had assumed he would see from the beginning. Thank Merlin. It’s about time he danced to the music. “You’re only doing this because you think he won’t want someone who isn’t the magical heir to his family.”

That did startle Draco into laughter. “Are you mad, Lucius? Of course not. Harry wouldn’t look twice at someone just because he was a magical heir.” He looks for other things, like compassion, and that’s where I might not be able to hold him. “I will admit, I want to court him properly, and I need to be a magical heir to our family to be able to use the ritual I have in mind. And I’m sure he’ll ask me all sorts of questions about the ritual when I tell him I want to court him, so I’d like to be able to reassure him that I have everything in order.” He cocked his head, secure, confident, feeling as if they were both in freefall down a mountain and he was the only one who had wings. Lucius was better at studied and practiced situations, and he was better at situations in motion. “I love Harry, Lucius. That’s not going to change. You should get used to it.”

“You are unworthy of courting a Lord-level wizard, with the weaknesses you have,” Lucius said, face twisted. Draco supposed he was being forced to change his mind about his son now, but he was obviously still resisting. “A true Malfoy would have his own interests and ambitions at heart. You think to adapt yourself to Potter—“

“His name’s not Potter any more,” said Draco helpfully. Inwardly, he cheered. Lucius was rattled if he’d forgotten that.

“To Harry,” said Lucius, with a glare that said he resented even Harry’s dropping his surname at that moment, “and not to stand for yourself. Do not lie, Draco. I have seen the way your eyes follow him. You think of nothing else but him.”

Draco cocked his head and hummed. And he had the answer to this, too, rising smoothly to his lips as he could not have imagined it doing before this confrontation. “That’s because I’m thinking of the future, Lucius, and not just the present. Yes, right now I don’t know everything about what I want, and a lot of what I want is Harry, and

I'm probably not standing enough on my own." But it's still enough to face you and best you like this, isn't it, Father, without Harry's help? "But I know that I can change, and, unlike you, I don't think I need to have the change accomplished right this moment. You want me to be some perfect little statue who never changes again. And that runs counter to the Malfoy adaptability you were just telling me about, the same quality that let you survive Voldemort." He noted in delight that Lucius had flinched at the name. "I'm going to change, instead, to become who I am and who I want in my own time. Even worse than changing myself just because of Harry would be trying to change myself into someone 'independent' of him just because someone else told me I should. I don't let others' desires guide me that way, Lucius. I want what I want, and if I want to take some time to discover how I should change, then I'll take that time."

"This is ridiculous," Lucius snapped. "This is mad. You are weak. You need Harry too much. You spend too much of your life spinning around him."

"I know that you think I should love him more the way that you love Mu—Narcissa," said Draco, deciding at the last moment that calling her "Mum" would weaken his posture of strength. "But I don't, and you'll just have to live with that, too. Part of who I am is bound up with him. That's all right. I accept that. I even want it that way." The expression of horror on his father's face really was going to make him laugh if Lucius didn't stop that. "I do need him, and trying to change that would be stupid. So I didn't choose him out of pure disinterested strength to strength, the way you chose Narcissa and she chose you, but that doesn't matter. Harry worried about the same thing, once, when he believed that he'd compelled me into liking him with the strength of his magic. I told him that it was impossible to sort out true friendship from magic, and that I didn't care. And now it's impossible for me to sort out how much is choosing and how much is needing. I don't care. I'll look into what should change and when it should change, and change it as needed. But no one else is going to hurry me into that, no one else is going to rush me. Not you, and not Harry, and not Snape, and not Narcissa. No one else in the world. I'm not a perfect, frozen statue. I'm not the perfectly independent, disinterested spectator that someone choosing Harry based on his power would be. I'm not some mad dueler who ignores his weakness and tries to

increase his strengths until he's defeated, inevitably." Draco took a deep breath, feeling that the next words were incredibly important, for some reason. "I'm not you, Lucius."

And he saw them do their work.

Lucius could see that now, actually. He wondered how he had missed it for so long.

He prided himself on being able to survive because he did not make stupid mistakes, because, once he was faced with reality, he accepted it and rode it. He had done that when his father died, when the Dark Lord fell, when he realized that he had no choice but to ally with Harry, when he had seen how the Ministry changed in the wake of Fudge's departure. He might try to keep his options open, as he had once done in his alliance with Harry, but when his choices were cut off, then he could take the only one left.

And the only reasonable conclusion left now was that he had been wrong about Draco, wrong about the kind of strength he had. To go on denying that just to salve his own pride would be to act more stupidly.

He'd underestimated his son. It had taken Draco only a few insults to make him crack. His own blows had made little impact. It should not have happened, would not have happened if Lucius had been a little more clear-eyed, but it had happened, and Draco was revealed as not the ice cliff Lucius had despised him for not being, but as a fierce, fast, lithe survivor. He had that quickness that enabled wizards to win on the battlefield, when he wanted to have it.

Lucius had seen him shaken in the past, had seen his son unable to counter insults and lose his temper, and he was of the opinion that Draco needed to summon his determination more often. But that did not excuse his own profound mistake in denying the nature of the opponent he faced.

He held out his hand to his son, who was not him, and not Abraxas, and was not any of the Malfoys Lucius had studied for the last thirteen generations, but surely might be the heir to Septimus Malfoy,

who had argued his mother into transferring her powers to him on her death, even though Septimus was not her magical heir. "You have faced me," he said. "I shall do as you have asked."

Draco smiled at him. "Thank you," he said. "I'm glad." And those were, if not the concluding words of the ritual, at least appropriately simple. "You'll confirm me as magical heir?" he asked, testing.

Lucius nodded.

"And you'll use the ritual to transfer your magic to me when you die?"

Lucius gave him a swift, reprimanding look, and Draco nodded, understanding that he had pushed too far. He hadn't asked for that, only suggested it, and with the facing ended, they were father and son once more. He had no right to ask for something Lucius did not yet want to give.

"Then should we approach the confirmation now?" Draco turned towards the door, but looked expectantly at his father over his shoulder.

Lucius studied him for a long moment.

There had never been much room in his life for delight. The closest he could remember feeling to it was when Narcissa agreed to marry him, and when Draco was born. Lucius took a long moment to recognize the emotion that was rising in him with as much determination as a green plant forcing its way through a stone.

He had raised a son who was a worthy heir. He had spent years reconciling himself to the fact that he'd spoiled Draco, indulged him so much that he had little chance of getting a decent Malfoy out of him, and to the fact that he was not Lucius's magical heir. And now Draco had proved him wrong, and given him a worthy heir in the process.

He had made one mistake, but it had kept him from making another, and more profound, one—seeing only just enough of Draco to try to mold him in an absolutely contrary direction to the one he wanted to

go. Instead, he'd left him almost alone, and Draco had grown strong and flourished without his interference.

"We shall," he said, and strode past Draco to take the lead, letting the delight grow in him for the moment. It was not as though the other emotions would not come back later.

I have a son. And he is worthy.

Chapter Sixty-Six: Malfoy, a History

Draco followed his father steadily towards the back of the Manor, not surprised that he could feel a low buzzing in the walls now. He hadn't noticed it before because he hadn't been that connected to the Manor. Now he was truly the accepted son of its master, and the building was taking an interest in him that it would otherwise have reserved until Lucius died. Signatures on a piece of paper meant little next to acceptance from magical artifacts, Draco knew.

He wished for a moment that Harry could know this sensation, then shivered. He's Voldemort's magical heir. I don't think that Harry would really like the sensations that Voldemort's house would give him, assuming that he even has a house.

Lucius halted in front of a door that Draco had tried to open about twice a year, each time getting a nasty, twitch-inducing shock for his troubles. Lucius opened it effortlessly, and stepped into the room beyond, motioning for Draco to enter when he hesitated.

Draco did, and felt the difference at once. The room was so heavy with wards that it entirely shut off perception of the outside world; the rest of the Manor could fall off the face of the earth while he was in here, and he'd never notice. The room was circular, with blue-gray walls and floor, and no decoration to soften the bleak stone. Draco heard a rustling murmur of many voices, rising and falling in his ears as if he stood in the middle of a vast, invisible crowd. He couldn't quite distinguish what any of them were saying even when he listened, though. But he knew instinctively that they were Malfoy voices.

"This is our room, Draco," said Lucius softly. "This is the heart of the Manor, the part where the first stones were laid, and the one room into which neither our enemies, nor the house elves, nor anyone not of Malfoy blood, can enter. It was built as a sanctuary for the family heads and their children, if anyone ever invaded the Manor itself." His mouth tightened for a moment. "Wives and husbands not of Malfoy blood were not included, because they might have been the ones who betrayed the family in the first place."

Draco nodded. He could feel the difference in the stones here. They were the color of the Malfoy crest, and they gladly accepted him, now. But he would not be able to bring even Harry here to hide, perfect as the hiding place would be. If and when he adopted or had an heir, then he could bring him or her here, and no one else.

Lucius held out a hand, and Draco was startled to see a staff made of what looked like blue light extending from it. He knew his father hadn't been holding that when they came in. Lucius stretched his arm out to its furthest extent, and the end of the staff brushed the far wall.

"I come," said Lucius softly, "with my son and my magical heir, sealed in the blood, sealed in the bone. I accept him as magical heir of the Malfoy family. I confirm him as my magical heir."

The stones rumbled, and the room seemed to grow tighter. Draco sucked in his breath. Had the walls actually drawn closer? Maybe not, but it seemed like it.

"I ask," said Lucius, and this was the only time Draco had ever heard his father sound humble, "for my ancestors' approval of my choice, and for their confirmation of my son as heir, if they will give it." He dropped his hand, the staff vanishing, and then knelt, his long hair falling around his face. Draco had seen him make the gesture in front of Narcissa before, but then, Lucius had always used one knee, rendering the submission less than complete.

This time, he knelt on both knees.

Draco swallowed.

"Down, Draco," Lucius said, and Draco felt abruptly that it was close to blasphemy to be on his feet in this room. He knelt, using both knees. His hair wasn't long enough to fall around his face, but it extended to his shoulders, and he hoped that would work. He bowed his head, and waited.

The pressure of watching eyes and voices grew greater, and then Draco felt as if someone drew blood from his arm. He looked that way,

expecting to see a knife and a cut, but he wasn't losing blood. He was losing a thin trickle of blue-gray light that he didn't understand.

And then he did, and fear cut through his awe. He was losing magic. He tried to scramble to his feet.

Lucius's hand shot out and clamped on his knee, squeezing so hard Draco was sure he heard the joint grinding. "Still, Draco," he snarled. "It will be returned to you. But it must be drawn out of you and examined, first. This is why we hold this ceremony in this room, so that our enemies may not attack us while we are at our most vulnerable. Our ancestor who enchanted this room for the confirmation ritual was an absorbere. Kneel. Be still."

Draco dropped his head and was still, though his body vibrated with pain and discomfort, and he thought he could feel himself growing gradually weaker and weaker. And then he was in the middle of a deep, motionless, almost emotionless state, and he wondered if this was what it was like to be a Muggle.

If so, he wondered why in the world Lily Potter hadn't killed herself, and he felt sorry for Dumbledore for the first time.

And he felt a frisson of fear he had never contemplated before about Harry. He had the power to do this. Of course, so did Voldemort, and Draco wondered that he could have so witlessly charged into battle against the Dark Lord. He would be more cautious in the future, that was all.

Assuming he got his magic back.

He glanced up to see a corona of blue-gray playing around his head, widening and then spinning back in towards him, as the magic of the room considered his magic. Draco held his breath. He had never heard what happened if the ritual didn't work, if the child was judged unworthy of becoming the magical heir. Would he stay a Muggle for the rest of his life? He could see why some of his ancestors would have thought that a fitting punishment.

He bowed his head, and tried to ignore his cold shivers. This was bringing him face to face with weakness. Draco couldn't say he liked the sensation, but he needed to know it, as well as his strength.

The corona abruptly brightened until it was strong enough to send shadows bouncing on and spinning off the walls. Draco squinted, and then the voices returned to his conscious notice for the first time since he entered the room. This time, he could hear what they were saying. They didn't seem to be commenting on him, but to be living and playing out dramas that must have been real at one time. He suspected that some of them had been translated from French or Latin or even other languages into English.

"...never should have trusted a Saxon to keep his promises."

"My son, I will say this one more time. If you do not unbind me from this altar this moment, you will not live to see the moon rise."

"Never to be parted, no, never."

"Of course he is your son, brother."

"And how can I think that love is less than complete here, in this wonderful place, beside the slow-flowing river?"

"Will you please tell me how a daughter of mine got herself transported by the Muggle authorities, however briefly?"

"I do not think—" That one ended in a death gurgle, which might have been made by a knife plunging into a throat, and Draco shuddered.

"I will rise again. The phoenix does not stop burning because you kill it once."

"It was only Muggle-baiting, Mother! Only a bit of fun! How was I supposed to know that she was my Squib cousin?"

"Because, Mother, you aren't stupid, and you know I'd make a better magical heir for you than any of the other children you've got, lazy

bastards that they are.” Draco grinned briefly at that one, thinking he’d like to meet the Malfoy who’d said it.

The voices rose and danced around him, and then the corona shrank, his own magic spiraling back into his body. Draco opened his arms to welcome it, and into his body he took the memories the voices had been speaking of as well.

Images rushed and blurred through his head. The effect, oddly enough, wasn’t of a stream, but of a few images that he isolated from the rest and remembered. They seemed to be in no chronological order. He saw a woman he recognized from her brilliant eyes and serene countenance as Julia Malfoy cradling a baby and singing to him. That would be her son, Draco supposed, the one she’d borne her own brother when she decided that he needed an heir.

Then came a vision of his father entering this room beside his own father. He couldn’t have been more than sixteen, and his face had been cold even then.

Further back the visions reeled, and further back, and Draco caught a glimpse of a young woman on a horse pounding through broken, rocky ground and soaring mountains, bent so far forward over the saddle that he only caught a glimpse of her face because the wind tore her long white-blond hair back. Behind her came three men who all looked like her, probably brothers or cousins. Draco could feel her desperation, and knew she was thinking that if she could only get to the border of Spain, then she would be safe from the disgusting things they wanted her to do.

Then he was in a soaring room, a cathedral of some sort, and with a young Malfoy man who knelt among the chanting Muggles and sneered. Let them chant, if they would. His Dark Lord was coming soon enough, and he would cause destruction here of the kind that would be remembered for a thousand years.

He caught a glimpse of a lovely, dark-skinned woman whirling beside a river, dancing because her captors made her do it. She looked completely different from a Malfoy, her hair black and her skin brown and her eyes a deep brown, but the defiance and the sternness in her

face was the same as that in Julia Malfoy's, in his father's face, in the face of the young woman escaping desperately through the Pyrenees.

Forward again, and he was riding a horse with a Malfoy man who thought being among Muggles and pretending to be one of them was fun, and especially when you came across the sea with a brilliant commander and had the fun of seeing if he could actually conquer the man who had tricked him out of a throne and settle his Norman French on this irritating island.

Lightning raked across a deep sky, and Draco stood on a pile of stones beside a Malfoy Dark Lord, who was laughing as he grabbed the storm out of the air and hurled it at his opponent, a Light Lady who fell before him. He laughed again, and then he grew alert and snapped to the south. A storm of Light was brewing there, rolling golden up the sky. The Malfoy, who called himself Lord Lightning, braced himself. The rumors were true, then; the Lady had had a brother of equal strength, and he was coming.

Draco saw weakness and strength and defiance that could have been either. He saw endless faces, endless fates, endless incarnations of the Malfoys, sometimes in a large family, sometimes in a small, mostly marrying purebloods, sometimes sneaking off and marrying Mudbloods or even Muggles, born to Lord-level power and born Squibs. The one thing that thrummed between all of them was that they did not give up, and they reached endlessly for what they wanted, even when they did not achieve it.

Draco nodded. This is what I am heir to. I can handle this.

And then the room wheeled back into his view, the parade of images ending, and he felt the magic draw in a breath. He had been tested in his weakness, and he had seen the strength that he was heir to. What now? Draco asked silently, panting and wondering what else the room had in mind.

A voice answered him like the tolling of a bell. You must face your own weakness.

Draco frowned slightly. He knew he was magically weaker than Harry. Was that what was meant?

No. This is not the weakness in the magic itself, but the weakness that may prevent you from using it.

Knowledge slammed into his mind like the crack of Lord Lightning's storm. Draco saw himself in many ordinary moments: arguing with Harry, putting aside homework when it was too hard, turning away with a sigh from a spell that he knew he could learn but which required such fancy wandwork that he didn't see why it was worth it.

Laziness, said the implacable voice of the room. You are capable of great things when you push yourself to be. Most of the time, you will not push yourself. You lapse, you do not work, you allow yourself to be conquered. That is intolerable.

"It's hard!" Draco burst out. "I don't see why I should have to put in the effort when I don't have to!"

Then you will never become better, said the room. There was no sympathy in its voice, only judgment. You will never achieve as you could have. You must ride the storm in all times and places, not only when you truly want something or want to save your beloved's life. The only way to become better at magic is to do magic. Determination means nothing if it is not sustained.

Draco's skin crawled at the thought of living like Harry did, pushing himself all the time, barely knowing the meaning of relaxation. Harry had said that he lived most of his life by enduring. Draco could not imagine it. He liked enjoying himself.

You are still making a mistake, said the voice, steady as the iron clump of hooves in the vision of the fleeing Malfoy heiress and horse. This does not cut out enjoyment. It cuts out uselessness, and that is something very different.

Draco admitted, reluctantly, that the room was right. When he enjoyed himself most, it was by doing something, whether that was dreaming up punishments on people who annoyed him or kissing

Harry. He also liked lying around and doing nothing, but apparently the room thought he could be using that time to master his magic and become a more useful and productive Malfoy heir.

Wanting does not bring your triumphs to you. Working for them does.

Draco blinked in spite of himself. "I think some of my ancestors didn't know that," he had to point out.

But your father does. Very well. And none of your ancestors who did not know this were magical heirs.

Draco bowed his head. He had called up his determination, hadn't he, and screwed it to the sticking point? He still didn't know if he could do that all the time—it would be both easier and more pleasant to lapse back into the selfish child he liked being, because even trying to see what others thought or meant was hard—but he would try, because he wanted to be magical heir more than he wanted to be anything else at the moment.

And he had had fun in confronting his father, he thought suddenly. The sense of motion, of not knowing what would happen until he actually spoke the words that blossomed in his thoughts, of skipping from rock to rock in a general downrushing fall, had been fun. He could probably learn to find opportunities for that in the rest of his life, if he just looked.

The room let him go. Draco stumbled, and fell forward, kneeling in silence for a moment as the magic withdrew into the walls. He sucked in a breath and blinked several times, then touched his throat, expecting it to be raw with screaming for some reason. He was slightly surprised to find it wasn't.

"That wasn't fun," he muttered.

Lucius's voice startled him; he had almost forgotten his father was there. "Such rituals never are. That is not their point." Draco turned around to find his father regarding him with narrowed eyes, kneeling on one knee now, his face cool and utterly composed again. "So your greatest fault is your laziness."

Draco's face flamed. "What was yours?" he asked, and then wondered why in the world Lucius should answer.

But being in this room, and having his vulnerability bared, was making Lucius do odd things, apparently. He said quietly, "My sense of direction. At one time, I had a horrible temper which caused me to search for someone to fix blame on, and I was always finding the wrong person—or I misunderstood simple concepts because I could not understand their source, and continually committed or wasted my personal resources in the wrong direction. So now I track misunderstandings and crimes and new social forces to their source, and understand them."

Draco thought privately that his father had overcorrected for that fault, but he was not going to say it now. This ritual, too, was ending. He'd come face to face with his weakness and survived. They were returning to positions of relative strength, and in this position, Lucius's was greater than his.

"Shall we go tell Mother the good news?" he asked.

Lucius smiled, the smile that only Draco and his mother ever got to see. "We should. Merlin knows what she imagines is happening."

Narcissa watched her owl wing away, and sigh. In the end, her very confused letter of apology to Harry had proved easier to write than the one to St. Mungo's. They would want to know why Linden Gillyflower needed to know about the consequences of broken threefold oaths, and so far no excuse that Narcissa had come up with sounded convincing to her own ears and brain.

She turned back to her table. Thoughts of Draco and Lucius tried to intrude. Narcissa confronted them with the image of a polished mirror, the one useful trick she had ever learned from Bellatrix, and threw them into the trunk at the back of her thoughts. She picked up her quill again.

Someone knocked at her door. Narcissa dropped the quill, and then cursed at herself. She sat back in the chair, and made sure that her

shoulders were perfectly aligned and that her blonde hair fell precisely past them to frame her face.

“Yes?” she called. Her voice did not shake, she was pleased to note.

The door opened. Draco and Lucius stood on the other side of it. Lucius’s hand rested on their son’s shoulder, and Draco’s face shone as if a great fire had passed in front of him and left its reflection in his eyes. He stood taller than Narcissa had ever thought he could at this age. No matter how she scanned him, she could see no sign of a deaging spell.

“He passed,” Lucius said simply. “He is now acknowledged as my magical heir.”

Narcissa’s anxiety burned into joy so fierce that she laughed aloud. She flung herself into motion from around the table and came to stand before her son, staring down into his face. Lucius withdrew gracefully to give them a short time alone.

Narcissa realized for the first time that she didn’t have to stare down so far at Draco. He had not completed his growth yet, but he did reach her shoulder, and he looked back at her with such complacency that Narcissa thought he could intimidate several fully adult wizards of her acquaintance.

“How was it?” she asked, even as she lifted her hands to cradle his face and bent down to give him a kiss on the forehead.

“Difficult,” said Draco. “But I passed. And I’m going to start courting Harry with the full formal ritual on Walpurgis, assuming he accepts.”

Narcissa felt her joy flare brighter and brighter. She had to step away from Draco, to drink in the full sight of him again and understand what this meant.

She had subtly mixed her own influence with Lucius’s in the raising of Draco. She had known from his birth—Lucius could call it mother’s intuition in a contemptuous voice all he wanted, but still, it was real—that the son was different from the father, that Draco would never

survive unbroken if Lucius tried to constrain him to the harshest of the pureblood rituals. So Narcissa had at once worked in partnership with her husband and waged a subtle war against him, to insure that Draco could pass his earliest childhood unconstrained by anything, knowing what love was, before the dances had to begin. Even that had been a risk, though. Narcissa had doubted herself often enough, and had had to return to that original intuition for strength, because this was a harsh world that Draco was growing up in, with the next war between Light and Dark on the horizon, and the countless other, less fatal perils that had always threatened a young wizard's life and wholeness swimming around. Theirs was a world that could break or splinter the heart. Sometimes Narcissa had thought that Lucius was right. Draco might have been broken in childhood, but if he could rebuild himself and survive, surely that was better than his death?

But now she could see the son she had hoped for standing before her, and she knew her high risk had paid off. Draco had taken his father's and his mother's lessons, Malfoy and Black, and blended them, instead of becoming so hard he could not feel or so soft that he would smash into pulp at the first harsh experience. He was much better than either ice or pulp, Narcissa thought. He was alive.

"Thank you, Mother," Draco said, as if he could sense the trend of her thoughts, "for all that you did for me, and tried to do."

Narcissa clasped him close in her arms, and shut her eyes. At the moment, her world was perfect, and complete, and she had nothing else to hope for.

Harry blinked, and looked again at the letter that Narcissa's owl, Regina, had just delivered to him, to make sure that he wasn't seeing things. The letter remained stubbornly the same.

Dear Harry:

There is no good way to say this, and there are no good words to carry my feelings. I will simply say that I am sorry for what I accused you of four days ago, and say that I know you did not violate my oath on purpose.

I have been unable to learn the consequences of broken threefold oaths, and that makes me uneasy. Generally, they were achieved, and though certain books speak of terrible consequences if they are broken, they do not specify what those consequences are. I think the authors themselves did not know. Perhaps the knowledge was so common that it was not seen as worth the writing down. I will write St. Mungo's. They may have treated a patient in the past for the consequences of one, and have more knowledge than the books in the Malfoy libraries (a sentence that would shock Lucius nearly to death if he had seen me write it).

I hope that you are well, and that things will soon grow well between you and Draco, and you and your guardian. I also know that you are heir of the Black fortune and houses. Please assure Regulus that I approve entirely.

Narcissa Malfoy.

Harry frowned, folded the letter, and laid it on the end of his bed. Then he looked at Regina and shook his head. "No response."

Regina hooted at him in disapproval. Harry could feel his lips thinning with irritation. "No response, I said. I'll have to think about it a little while."

That seemed to partially content the owl, as did the treat he fed her next, but she still gave him a disapproving look as she launched herself from his bed, through the open bedroom door, and down to the common room, where she would stare meaningfully at someone until they opened the door for her. Harry turned his attention back to the letter he'd been contemplating before Narcissa's arrived.

Scrimgeour had certainly heard quickly about his declaration in favor of werewolves' rights, and he was letting Harry know, regretfully, that they weren't on the same side in this matter. If Wolfsbane Potion were less expensive to make and able to be distributed to every werewolf in Britain, he told Harry, he might change his mind, but it wasn't, and that was that. He did agree that some of the laws were restrictive and needed to be changed, but he was not in favor of ending such things as the registration of werewolves. He argued that

if the law-abiding ones were registered, then when an attack happened, they would know it came from one of those who refused to accept the rule of law.

Harry growled to himself. Scrimgeour didn't see the very concept as degrading, probably because he wasn't a werewolf. Harry would just have to write back and try to make him see it from that point of view.

He'd reached for paper and quill to make that happen when Draco entered the room. Harry started and turned towards him.

Then he froze. Draco had a smile on his face, but that wasn't unusual. He was walking with a step somewhere between a swagger and a strut, but that wasn't so unusual, either.

Something had changed, though. Harry thought it was a combination of subtle things—the way he carried himself, as if both the jerky angles and smooth motion that made up his gait were more themselves; the look in his eyes, as though he had heard some grand and terrible news and had to accept both parts of it; the impatience for the future in his face. Harry couldn't remember Draco looking that impatient for the future before, except when he was discussing something he wanted. Now he looked as if he wanted it to come for its own sake, so that he could see what would happen.

Harry knew he was staring. He realized he didn't care, and from the smirk Draco sent him, he surely didn't care, and might even approve.

"I—you went somewhere other than Hogwarts?" When he'd come back to Slytherin after dinner and Draco still wasn't there, Harry had assumed he was in the library or perhaps an abandoned classroom, sulking. He had stifled the urge to go after him. Yes, in one way he'd wanted to, but Draco was likely to take the gesture entirely the wrong way at this point, thinking that it would mean Harry was admitting he was right about pureblood superiority.

"Yes." Draco dropped onto his own bed. He was still staring at Harry with that odd combination of expressions on his face, and Harry still couldn't look away. It was annoying. "I went home."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "There was something you needed to speak about with your father?" He supposed it was too much to hope for that Draco had talked his father into accepting Muggleborns as equals and Lucius was coming to Hogwarts tomorrow to make an announcement about his conversion.

"Yes." Draco leaned forward. "I'm magical heir to the Malfoys now."

Harry found himself speechless. Draco had let him know last summer that Lucius was still angry about him attending Walpurgis Night, and that he'd refused to make Draco his magical heir as a consequence. Harry had expected that Draco would wear Lucius down eventually, but not this soon.

"Why?" he asked finally, and wished he knew what part of the question he was asking.

"Because I went to my father," Draco said simply, "and faced him, and forced him to respect me. He didn't really do it before, Harry, did you know that? He thought of me as this weak creature. It's the only explanation for why he put up as little resistance as he did." Then his expression, which had dropped away from a smile to something more intense, became a full-fledged smirk again. "I was ready because I wasn't ready. I just acted from moment to moment, the way I did when we attacked Dumbledore together, and Lucius thought it was part of some careful plan and tried to dismantle it, and he couldn't, because I didn't know what would happen next. It was rather fun, actually."

"I don't—" Harry said, and then stopped. There were so many things he wanted to say that that he didn't know how to choose among them. He was going to say that that didn't sound like Draco, but now he suspected that he had seen this Draco before, killing Whitecheek and kissing him last year for the first time and facing his father in second year as well as attacking Dumbledore. He wanted to ask more about what it felt like, but he wasn't sure Draco would understand him. He wanted to ask about the confrontation, but he wasn't sure Draco would tell him. He wanted to say that if Draco was now in favor of impulsive actions, had he changed his mind about Harry going to Durmstrang with Rosier? And that would spawn nothing good.

Draco turned and whispered a locking spell at the bedroom door. It slammed shut. Harry raised an eyebrow. "Blaise won't like that," he said, grateful that had come spilling out of his throat all on its own.

Draco turned around, and Harry swallowed. This wasn't going to be put off by distractions, he realized, any of it.

"Blaise can sod off," said Draco impatiently. "Right now, Harry, I want to have a conversation that doesn't involve yelling, or insults. It can involve apologies, but only if we both mean them." He eyed Harry. "Is that acceptable?"

"Did you plan this?" Harry managed to ask.

"I'm going to ignore the tone of that remark," Draco said pleasantly, "since I could consider it an insult if I wanted. But yes, as a matter of fact, I did. What I was going to do, anyway. Not what I was going to say." He leaned forward. "So I find the first thing I want to say is that I don't like fighting with you. So I want to stop."

Harry wished for a moment that he were in the lynx form he wore in his visions of Voldemort. He would have liked to flatten his ears. "I'm still angry at you," he said. "I'm not going to stop fighting just like that."

"And what are you angry about?"

"That you thought I endangered my life on purpose," Harry said. "You still seem to think that, and so does Snape. I told you, I did the best I could under the circumstances. And I can't alter my response to events that easily. People would rightly despise me if I became the kind of leader who let other people die instead of risking his own life."

Draco shook his head slightly. "I got angry out of worry, Harry. I do think, now, that you probably couldn't have done anything else right then. But I think you could plan a little more for some situations."

"Rosier is utterly unpredictable," Harry reminded him.

“Not Rosier,” said Draco. Harry bit his tongue on the temptation to say that of course Rosier wasn’t someone Draco could confront, and listened. “But these situations in general, Harry. Concentrate on learning more healing magic, for example, so that you won’t have to feel utterly helpless when an enemy throws a Severing Curse. Work on strengthening your own magic; you have powers, but you prefer to rely on your old training rather than learn anything new.” Harry tensed, but the tone of his voice was largely neutral, analytical, so Harry let it slide. “Look through the gifts you’ve been given and the artifacts you have now that you’re Black heir. Look at them, not just see if they can be useful later.”

Harry nodded. All of those suggestions made sense, really, and he could think of one Draco had neglected to add, maybe because he didn’t know about it. Harry supposed he had to find out what the hell it meant to have Fawkes’s voice, sometimes, and phoenix fire, sometimes. If those had been gifts from the wild Dark, Harry would have accepted that they had no laws or rules, but Light magic was much more about order and control, and phoenixes were magical creatures who lived by natural laws.

“Why haven’t you done more things like that?” Draco wound up his list of suggestions.

Harry looked away from him with a grimace. “Because I feel as if I’m stretched thin enough as it is,” he said shortly. “The more time I spend training my own powers, the more time I have to take away from something else. There’s been the Durmstrang crisis and Dumbledore and the wild Dark in the past month alone—” he shuddered a little as he realized how fast those had come, one right after the other “—and before that, there was my parents’ trial, and more work to try to determine how to undo the lightning ward. I haven’t even had a meeting of the dueling club in a month. I need to get back to that. Every time I start thinking about how many obligations I have, they start overwhelming me. I know I’m splayed about as far as I can go right now and still accomplish schoolwork, sleep, and eat. Start training my powers, and something else would have to end.”

“And do you think that most of your allies and friends would mind that?” Draco asked.

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Well, yes. Charles and Thomas certainly minded their children being trapped in Durmstrang.”

“But most of these obligations aren’t as urgent as that.” Draco leaned nearer to him to make the point. “And Charles and Thomas were willing to work on that particular problem themselves, while you did other things. Harry, you can delegate. You can tell people that certain things will have to wait while you try to become stronger. What you did in front of the school today was wonderful, though why you gave the money to the Weasleys like that I’ll never know—“

“So that no one would accuse them of stealing it,” said Harry. “So their parents would know they got it perfectly legally. Now you know.”

Draco smiled faintly, but that still didn’t lessen the utter determination in his face. “I was referring more to giving money to Weasleys in the first place, but never mind,” he murmured. “But you’ve only committed yourself to a fight for the werewolves’ rights. You didn’t say that you were going to knock the unfair laws down by next weekend and have a werewolf Minister in place by June. And I don’t think that anyone expects you to.”

“Who are you and what spell have you put Draco under?” Harry demanded.

“I had to learn a few home truths today,” said Draco, and for a moment he winced. “Some things about myself I didn’t really like. This morning, and then again this afternoon.” The next moment, his gaze was steady again. “And I think it’s time you did the same, Harry.”

“I’ve been through that,” said Harry.

“Only one set. Did you really think that was the end?”

Harry ground his teeth. “No,” he said at last. Sometimes he hated it when someone else made so much sense that he couldn’t duck and

dodge and offer excuses any more. “But with the way crises have been piling up lately, I was hoping to put that off for a little while. I have to be ready and open to respond to any problem that comes this way, as Rosier showed me. Dedicating so much of my effort to training and delegating and so on would—“

“Not change things fundamentally,” Draco interrupted calmly. “Except that you’d be working with an eye on the more distant future than next week, this time. You’re holding yourself open for crises already, but you still did research on the lightning ward and found time to arrange that account for Professor Lupin.” He looked on the verge of asking Harry why he’d done that, too, but refrained, as he probably knew. “I think you can do this, too, Harry. And if someone asks you why you’ve changed, explain. Most of your allies and friends would be thrilled to know that you’re trying to become a stronger leader instead of simply losing yourself in the small problems.”

Harry had to snort a little, at the sound of someone calling the wild Dark a “small problem.”

“Understatement,” said Draco. “I know. I’m sorry. I’ve got to stop doing that.” While Harry gaped at the casual apology, he forged ahead. “But things have got to change, I think, Harry. Even if you’re still angry at me and Snape, know that.”

“I am,” said Harry. “Still angry, that is.”

“But you’re sitting here and talking to me quietly enough.” Draco gave him an inquiring look.

Harry scowled at nothing and tried to think of words to voice the realization he’d come to during History of Magic, since he’d nothing to do but think about his argument with Draco that morning. “I—the anger isn’t enough, by itself, to keep me from talking to you. It was the idea that you still didn’t see the sense of anything I was talking about that irritated me so much, that you still wanted me to give in about everything. And that’s not the way it works. That’s not the way it can work. Everything’s got to change all the time, Draco, from argument to argument, maybe even day to day. Sometimes I will be completely wrong and unreasonable. Sometimes you will. And I

thought that was the way you were acting right then.” He raised his eyes to Draco’s, hoping he could convey what he meant.

Draco said nothing for a moment. Then he said, “Being compared to your mother hurt, you know.”

“I know.”

“Do you really believe that?”

Harry shook his head. “Only in the heat of anger.”

“Then why say it?”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “In the heat of anger, Draco. If we’re going to try as hard as we can to understand each other, then you should understand that I say things I don’t mean, too.”

“And you still haven’t apologized for it.”

“And you still haven’t apologized for anything you’ve said!” Then Harry hesitated. “Unless saying that you think I was right to do what I did in the Rosier situation was an apology.”

“It was supposed to be,” said Draco. “All right. I’m sorry for doubting your competence and your morals, Harry, and I’m sorry that I acted as if you had to become a different kind of person to fight this war.”

Harry nodded. “I’m sorry for comparing you to my mother,” he said. “The rest, not really. I do think that I’ll have to change certain things about myself, the training, like you said, but not the rest. I’m never going to alter myself that much.”

“I know,” said Draco. “I wouldn’t want you to. I’m thinking of you changing the things you concentrate on so you can protect what’s most important about you.” He leaned forward and captured Harry’s lips in a brief kiss, before settling back again. “Now. What you said about changing from argument to argument...it’ll have to happen all the time, won’t it? And just going back to being lazy, the way I was before, won’t work.”

Harry blinked. "I wouldn't call you lazy."

Draco laughed dryly. "That's because you haven't been inside my head. I was, Harry. I knew sometimes that I could have achieved better marks or more attention or even heroics like you, but it's so much easier to demand it, or throw a tantrum, or just not do anything than get it. It's hard. I think it's even harder than the putting your head down and pushing you told me about, because here I'm fighting my way uphill, not accepting what comes." He tilted his head at Harry, and his eyes shone. "But I'm good at dancing on a rockslide. I think I can do that. This. I think I can change from moment to moment, day to day, and not just in our arguments. All the time. I know I can; it's just been my own reluctance that's kept me from it." Harry wondered privately if that was really true, but Draco certainly sounded as if he believed it. "I can do this, Harry. Merlin, I can do this. And I know that you can, though I have to teach you some things about enjoying what you do and not just getting it out of the way, and you have to teach me some things about continuing, not just flaring once and then dying down."

Harry had to lower his eyes at the vision those words prompted. He and Draco, ever-changing, ever-whirling, ever in motion, achieving so many things that the times when they would slide back and make mistakes were beggared in comparison, because they would know that they wouldn't make those mistakes and get stuck in them forever. The future didn't end, wasn't cut off, and things would always change. So long as they could remember that, then they would avoid most of the pit traps Harry had seen other people fall into.

"Harry," said Draco. "I want you to think about this. Now that I'm magical heir to the Malfoy family, I can court you with a full ritual that no one but a magical heir is allowed to use. It takes three years."

Harry stared at him. Even with the vision in his head, to hear that Draco wanted to take this kind of step to make the vision a reality was—odd. Perhaps it was easier to think about than to do.

But Draco had taken a risk. The least Harry could do was meet it. He cleared his throat. "Go on."

"It's a joining ritual," Draco said. "Or a marriage ritual, but you are definitely not a girl." His eyes had a lazy, appreciative look in them as he ran them over Harry's body. "It takes place four times a year, so there are twelve rituals—or thirteen, really, but the final ritual is the joining itself. Walpurgis is one night, and then the holiday that used to be called Lammas, on August first." He grinned. "I think we can use your birthday for that one. Then Halloween marks the third ritual, and then the old holiday of Imbolc, on the second of February, is the fourth. Rituals will happen on those days, if you agree." He cocked his head at Harry. "I hope you agree, obviously, but take some time to think about it."

"Is that why you're not starting this Imbolc?" Harry asked wryly, when he'd recovered his breath.

"Right," said Draco. "So that you can have some time to think about it. Besides, all the best rituals like this one start on Walpurgis Night. Everyone says so."

Harry nodded absently, and rolled back on his bed. He had time to think about it. He really did. He could trust Draco to let him take that time.

And now he had a different kind of vision of the future, one that spun him dizzily around and made his breath come short and fast.

It didn't need to be totally separate from the world where he trained people in dueling and worked for werewolves' rights, either. Harry suspected that that was what Draco was most trying to show him.

"You're thinking about it?" Draco asked.

Harry closed his eyes. "I'm definitely thinking about it."

"Good," said Draco happily, and they leaped over a bit more of the argument between them, and into a new whirl of motion.

Chapter Sixty-Seven: When Light and Dark Get Together

Harry hesitated.

“Oh, come on,” Draco urged him. “It’s not as though anything in here will burn, not after we asked the Room for a room that won’t.”

“That was normal fire,” Harry muttered. “I’m not entirely sure about phoenix fire.” But on the other hand, he wouldn’t learn anything if he never used it, so he extended his hand and concentrated, for the first time, on making the flame spring up instead of simply accepting it when it appeared.

He felt an odd rush of blood in his veins, as though the fire intended to well to the surface of his skin that way, but nothing happened. He frowned slightly and closed his eyes, creating an intricate vision of what the flame had looked like the other times it had sprouted on his palm.

Blue at the center, clear azure, spreading out into orange and white. Harry found, though, that he could not remember exactly what the shape of the flame had been, or how the boundaries between colors looked. Was that why he was having so much trouble? He tried to cudgel his memory into behaving, and reached for a yet better vision of it.

“Harry!”

Harry’s eyes shot open in surprise, and he realized he was looking at the world through a blurry, blue-white sheet of flame. Phoenix fire covered his arms and shoulders like a mantle, crawled in his hair, and played around his face. Argutus, around his neck, was uttering a stream of excited chatter, basking in the heat. “Can we do this all the time? I think this is better than the sun. It feels more personal, as if the fire cares that I get warm. Maybe we could sleep like this? I think that’s a good idea. So what if you set a few blankets on fire? That’s all right. I—“

With an effort, Harry both stopped listening to the Omen snake and calmed the fire. It withdrew into his skin like wings retracting onto a

bird's back. Harry let out a shaky gasp, and then touched his hair, his face, and other exposed parts of his skin. The fire didn't seem to have burned him. He had no idea what would have happened if he'd sent the fire at the walls of the large dueling chamber the Room of Requirement had provided them when they'd asked for a room where Harry and Draco could both work on their spells.

"Don't do that," said Draco furiously from the other side of the room.

"Sorry," muttered Harry. "I don't know what caused it, though. I was only envisioning the small flame in my palm."

Draco made a soft, exasperated noise. "Well, think about it later. I want to test my rune circle out." He gave Harry an expectant look, and Harry nodded and looked at the symbols Draco had painstakingly scribed into the stone floor while Harry searched through the books the Room had provided them for healing spells he wanted to study.

Harry hadn't taken Ancient Runes, so he only knew those shapes that bore some slight resemblance to the letters of the alphabet. Based on that, he had no idea what the circle did, and he had to eye it dubiously. The last full rune circle Draco had tried had left him trapped in the room where he'd drawn it until the sun stopped shining on the circle—perfectly safe, of course.

He asked Draco about that, and received a haughty look in return. "That was a circle for binding and confinement, Harry," he said. "This one has a different purpose."

"What's the purpose?" Harry asked.

"You'll see what it is when it happens," said Draco, and then stepped into the circle. At once he slumped to the floor, his head nearly smudging one of the runes, and fell asleep.

Harry blinked. Well, I suppose that could be useful for trapping an enemy, though we'd still have to have chosen the battlefield first. That rune circle took him forever to draw. He inched forward, wondering if the circle had some other property after all, and Draco was about to

spring to his feet and catch him the moment he came up to the boundary.

Draco didn't move, though, other than the rising and falling of his chest in slow, peaceful breaths of deep sleep. Harry frowned. If that's his demonstration, how did he plan to get out of the circle without breaking it?

He studied the runes on the floor; they gave him no clue, of course. Harry shrugged and stretched out his hand, concentrating, to lift Draco with a Levitation Charm. He floated over the edges of the circle and landed on the floor.

Harry didn't think the landing had been that hard, but Draco was awake in instants, spluttering about "oafs who didn't realize that dropping someone onto a hard surface from a height hurt." Harry just shrugged again. "Was the rune circle supposed to put you to sleep?" he asked.

Draco's face turned a deep red.

"No?" Harry delicately suggested.

"It was supposed to render me invulnerable to any spells that might try to cross the boundaries of the circle, including your wandless magic!" Draco snapped. He scrambled to his feet and strode back to the circle, working around the runes. Argutus wriggled around Harry's neck, and Harry put him down on the floor. The Many snake poked her head out of the pocket of his robes, too, where, based on the hive's advice, he'd been keeping her lately, but pulled her neck back when she saw no danger to Harry. Argutus started slithering around the outside of the circle, reflecting the runes in his bright scales and staring hard at them. Harry bit his lips to keep from laughing, especially when Argutus mirrored one rune Draco had passed up and then looked at him, saying, "This one is wrong."

"Um, Draco?"

Draco sighed and looked back at him. "What?"

“Argutus found a rune you didn’t write down right.”

“That’s impossible, I can’t have come to it yet—“

“This one is wrong,” said Argutus. He still couldn’t understand English, but he had told Harry he knew from scent when he was being doubted. He flicked his tongue out now, and his hissing took on an annoyed sound. “Have him come back here and look at this one. There is a tiny hook that projects out to the left. In my reflection, it should project out to the right. But it goes right on projecting to the left. Something is wrong.”

Harry told Draco that. Draco gave him an extremely doubtful look and strode back, leaning down to peer into Argutus’s scales—which of course blocked the light and destroyed the reflection. Argutus hissed in deep displeasure, and writhed one coil that didn’t contain the mirrored rune as if he would grab Draco’s wrist. Harry raised an eyebrow. Argutus was long enough now to drape down over his shoulders when he coiled around Harry’s neck. He might break Draco’s arm if he squeezed hard enough.

“Don’t doubt him, please,” he said.

Draco sighed, and moved, and looked at the reflection from a different angle. Then he said, “That’s impossible.”

“Tell him he is ugly when he doubts me,” Argutus commanded.

Harry sighed. “Apparently not impossible if an Omen snake can sense that something is wrong with your circle, Draco.”

“But that’s a bit of spontaneously wrong magic,” Draco persisted. “I’m sure I didn’t draw the rune that way. It shouldn’t have gone wrong. Besides, most wrong rune circles just don’t work. They don’t have an effect so completely different from the one the creator intended.”

Harry couldn’t conceal a smile now. “I guess you’re just talented, Draco.”

“Really?” Draco leaned back with an expression very similar to Hermione’s when she’d got a potion right in Snape’s class and was hoping, against all expectation and experience, to be praised this time.

“Yes,” said Harry. “I do think that you’re talented, Draco. Prone to rush on small details, maybe. See what happens if you erase the rune and then draw it again. Maybe it’ll work this time.”

Carefully, Draco erased the tiny hook on the rune and redrew it. Then he stepped triumphantly into the circle and turned around to look at Harry. “All right, Harry. Send your most powerful spells at—“

He collapsed, deeply asleep again.

“Now it’s upside down in the reflection,” said Argutus helpfully.

Harry had to laugh then—it was not as if Draco were awake to hear him—before he used his magic to float him out of the circle again.

“Potter! What do you think you’re doing?”

Harry was so startled that he cut his arm more deeply than he’d intended, and the knife skittered out of his hand and onto the floor, joined by a cascade of blood from the wound. Muttering under his breath, he turned and glared at Millicent, who’d come down the stairs into the common room at an unfortunate time. Nearly everyone else was outside enjoying the first sunny day of February; Harry had thought she’d gone, too. “My name’s not Potter anymore,” he said. “I know you must have heard that news. Perhaps you disregarded it because your brain was half asleep at the time.”

Millicent ignored this, hurrying across and taking his arm. “May I ask why you’re cutting your own arm, Harry? And deeply, too,” she added, as her fingers became slick with the blood in a moment.

“Practicing healing spells.”

Millicent shut her eyes. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that.”

“Well, it’s true.” Harry fumbled in his pocket for his wand, muttering under his breath again as it slipped from his grip and fell back into his pocket. He summoned it into his fingers, then aimed it at the wound. He found it better to practice new spells with his wand first, before he tried to make them wandless. “Integro meliusculus!”

The flow of blood slowed, and the wound began to reknit itself, slowly. Harry nodded in satisfaction as a thick scab developed over about half the cut. The cut itself was deeper than he’d planned to make in the first place, but the spell still worked.

“Why didn’t it heal completely?” Millicent asked, frowning at Harry’s wand as if it were to blame.

“Because I didn’t want it to,” said Harry. “Integro meliusculus is only meant to make the wound somewhat better. It’s used on cursed wounds where too much healing magic at once would just trigger the curse to flare up again. I wanted to see if I could do it, and I can.” He nodded at his arm, feeling absurdly proud. The first few healing spells he’d practiced had needed two tries each before they worked. He wondered if healing magic was one of those subtle areas of magic where the passage of certain spells through the wizard’s brain and body and wand “prepared” them to handle others of the same kind of spell better.

“You still have to have this healed,” Millicent said flatly, looking as if she were about to dash to the hospital wing on her own.

Harry blinked. “Oh, that spell I already know. Integro!” he added, showing off by doing it without a wand.

The rest of his skin knitted over, and became an ugly, but healing, scab. Harry tugged his left arm away from Millicent and flexed it. “See?” he added. “As good as new.”

“Not quite.” Millicent shook her head, her mouth still so tight with exasperation that Harry thought she was the one who’d been taking lessons from Madam Pomfrey. “You do realize the standard procedure to test healing spells isn’t to cast them on yourself, Harry,

right? Apprentice mediwizards and mediwitches treat real live patients with their trainers, or they use animals.”

Harry laughed. “Well, I’m not about to begin training as a mediwizard—I’m not old enough for it, even if I wanted to—and I’m certainly not about to use magical creatures. I don’t see what’s wrong with this. I only cut myself that deeply because you startled me when you yelled my old name,” he added, feeling the need to defend himself before Millicent’s darkened eyes.

“It hurts, though,” said Millicent, as if Harry were mentally deficient. “And you could always damage yourself more deeply than you meant to, and be badly hurt or die before someone else finds you.”

“That’s not going to happen,” said Harry.

“Why not?”

Harry indicated Argutus, watching in interest from a nearby couch. “He knows to go for Draco or Snape if I tell him to or if I fall on the ground and don’t move. No, they can’t understand Parseltongue, but they’ll follow Argutus if he’s grabbing the edges of their robes and pulling.”

Millicent looked as if she were trying to decide between throttling him or herself. “And the pain?”

“I can ignore it easily,” Harry said, raising his eyebrows. He would have thought she would have remembered that before anything else. “The training, you know. If I can manage to concentrate through pain to tuck my guts back in, then I can concentrate through most of the pain I cause myself. Besides, it’s good practice. A battle that hurts other people isn’t going to leave me unscathed most of the time. If I have to heal someone else while concentrating through the pain of my own wounds, better I know what that feels like now, in a non-battle situation.”

Millicent still breathed deeply, her eyes fixed somewhere over his head. “I’m going to tell Professor Snape about this,” she said suddenly.

Harry flinched. Most of the other adults he had some hope would listen to his side of the story. Madam Pomfrey would cluck her tongue and glare, but accept that he could heal himself, and probably be more professionally interested than anything. Headmistress McGonagall had other things on her mind, given that the wards were starting to melt down into the earth again. Remus might object, but Harry thought he could talk him around. Snape, though, whom Harry had had a coldly polite relationship with for the past two weeks, would go mad. Harry was just starting to work towards reconciliation with him, was in fact planning on it when they could be in the same room for more than five minutes without wanting to bite each other's heads off. This would spoil it all.

"Look, Millicent, don't do that," he said, in the calmest voice possible, as if her threat hadn't affected him. "What do you want?"

Millicent cocked her head. "For not telling Snape, you mean?"

"For not telling anyone." Harry vowed to himself that he wouldn't let anyone catch him again. He didn't want to cast his Complete Vanishing spell, because then Argutus wouldn't be able to bring help if something nasty did happen, but there were out-of-the-way corners in the school where no one would think to look for him. And Argutus knew Hogwarts well enough, from his constant wandering, that he could find his way back to the dungeons from any corner of it.

Millicent bit her lip, chewing it. Harry waited. He could imagine a few prices she might ask from him. She'd been unable to master the last few spells they practiced in Charms. Perhaps extra tutoring was in order. Or perhaps she wanted some specific piece of magic from him? Harry could do that—

"I want you to stop giving yourself injuries to practice the spells on," Millicent said abruptly.

Harry blinked. Then he said, "What? No!"

"Then I tell Professor Snape." Millicent shrugged and turned towards the door out of the common room as if she would go do that right now.

"No!" said Harry in frustration. Sometimes, the world really would be simpler if I could just go around compelling people. "Listen, Millicent, I have to practice them this way," he went on, when she turned back around, distinctly unimpressed. "I can't hurt animals for this, and I don't want to practice on humans when I don't really know what I'm doing and might hurt them, too. This is the best way for me to get battlefield experience without actually being in battle."

Millicent shook her head. "You always insist on doing things the hard way, Harry. You could have talked to Madam Pomfrey, you know. Why didn't you?"

"Because the only way she could have me practice is on other students," said Harry. "I already told you why I objected to that."

"So perhaps you should just wait to actually do the spells, and learn the theory first." Millicent's voice had several shades of sarcasm in it. "I know that your usual method is to throw the spells first and then learn how they work, Harry, except in Defense, but I really think you should treat this like Defense."

Harry controlled his frustration. He couldn't think of any way to sway Millicent. If there had been the slightest softening in her expression, he would have tried, but she looked as stern as she had when she caught one of the third-years talking about putting a love potion into someone else's breakfast. She'd been chosen Prefect for a reason, Harry knew.

And if she told Snape, he really would go mad, and every bit of progress Harry had made with him since the original argument would be undone. Harry valued his relationship with his guardian more than the chance to keep practicing healing spells on himself.

"All right," he agreed.

"Promise me," Millicent said. "Swear by Merlin."

"I promise, in Merlin's name," said Harry glumly. He could admit that, looked at from the outside, this probably did sound like a stupid idea, but the more he read about healing magic, the more he thought that it would be useful, and he absolutely had to practice it. The thought of deliberately injuring someone else so he could practice horrified him, and then what would happen if he couldn't master the spell and couldn't heal the hurt? This had seemed the best compromise.

"Then I won't tell Snape," said Millicent, and made a little dusting motion with her hands. "Now, I'm going outside to watch the second-years. There's a gang of them who've developed a rivalry with a whole group of second-year Gryffindors, and they're all little monsters when they think someone isn't looking—the kind of children to give a snowball a lead core if they can." She shook her head and swept out of the common room.

"Are those lessons done?" Argutus asked.

Harry sighed and Scourgified the blood on the common room floor and the knife blade. "Yes."

"Too bad," said Argutus. "But perhaps we will learn other things now."

Harry nodded and wondered if Millicent would have been more sympathetic if he'd revealed that this was only his second day of practicing healing spells this way. He doubted it.

Harry ignored the glances. He knew how it looked. There were six post owls sitting patiently on the Slytherin table, awaiting their turn for attention, and he was furiously scribbling letters, trying to be diplomatic and persuasive at the same time. Even though a few of his allies wouldn't be coming to this grand gathering on Saturday, most of them would. They were asking questions about when they should arrive, whether they really had to Apparate outside Hogwarts' wards, if they had to bring gifts, whether gifts would be brought for them, demanding that he add just a bit of persuasion to make them come instead of attending to other commitments, and saying other things that Harry was more than willing to answer, as long as it would coax them into actually arriving.

This had been his main political business for the last three weeks, sending letters to all his allies and to all the families, Light and Dark, that his allies had mentioned as being potentially interested in alliance, trying to get them to agree to meet in the Room of Requirement on Saturday the seventeenth of February. First he'd had to overcome objections about meeting with wizards of the opposite allegiance, and then mass efforts to make him choose a different day, and then declarations that they wouldn't arrive if such-and-such a wizard or witch was there, and then, at last, these petty objections. Harry was willing to do almost anything to make it work, except the stupidly obvious things like meeting with only Light or Dark wizards, and now he almost thought it would.

Mortimer Belville wasn't coming, citing family commitments, but Compton Belville, who had now offered Harry adoption several times, was, and several of the minor Light pureblood families Augustus Starrise had told Harry usually did what the Starrises did. There were also several wizards tied in to the Opallines who were coming, strangers, and apparently a French witch had heard of the meeting through someone else and had written to Harry herself, asking permission to come. Harry had been pleased, especially since she told him she sat on the Veela Council. No, this wouldn't encourage them to make a decision about allying with him any faster, but it might at least present a positive impression of him.

If he could pull this off. Harry had never met with this many people before, and the nearest meeting in size had had an overwhelming majority of Dark wizards. At this one, if everyone attended who promised to, then there would be more who claimed allegiance to the Light. There were approximately several million things that could go wrong, but if he could pull it off, then perhaps abominations like the one he'd seen Voldemort performing last night would stop.

Harry grimaced and paused in writing, both to rest his wrist and to rub his scar. He'd gone into vision last night as a lynx and quietly watched, and there had been no sign that Voldemort noticed him. He certainly had never paused in chanting the spells that stitched pieces of cut-up human bodies into a creature bigger and stronger than the worm Harry had seen in the graveyard, a creature that resembled a lumpish dragon if it resembled anything, and had wings.

Harry had a sick feeling that he knew what had happened to the Muggles whom Voldemort had captured, using sirens, on the autumnal equinox.

He took a deep breath and plunged back into his letter-writing, ignoring Argutus's peaceful eating of sausages off his plate all by himself. Let people think he had terrible manners if they wanted. He had to make this work.

"And how does this spell work?"

Narcissa hid a smile as she finished casting the spell that would alert them when someone entered the Room of Requirement. She had come early to help ward the Room, partly with such spells and partly with Black artifacts placed in discreet locations, and Harry had been following either her or Regulus around most of the time, asking questions about the theory behind spells as if he were going to have an exam on them any moment.

"It senses flesh and blood," Narcissa told him now, as she stepped back and considered the light shimmer of the spell across the doorway. "It's one of the spells I used when we were searching for my cousin's body, trying to find out if he was hidden somewhere as himself. If someone enters in an Invisibility Cloak or under a Disillusionment Charm, the spell will tell me—and you. It has its limitations. It doesn't sense flesh and blood surrounded by other flesh and blood, for instance. If a woman came in with a baby in her arms, it wouldn't sense them as separate entities. And it wouldn't sense something like a poisonous spider clutched tight in someone's fist, until the fist open and the spider moved."

Harry cocked his head. He looked so charming at the moment, so incredibly full of concentration, that Narcissa felt any resentment she still carried towards him on account of the violated threefold oath fall away. She still hadn't received an answer from St. Mungo's about what the consequences of breaking the oath might be, but that was all right. It hadn't been Harry's fault—certainly not something he intended to do. And having listened to other descriptions of the

incident at Durmstrang now, Narcissa had to accept that Rosier would have killed Bellatrix if Harry had not.

“That sounds like a hard spell to escape detection by,” Harry said now. “What’s the point of clutching a poisonous spider in your fist for hours?”

“Well, it’s rumored to be the way Arabella Zabini killed her seventh husband,” Narcissa said, as she began casting the next ward. “He used that spell because he thought she would lure him to a room where her next lover was hiding and have them duel to the death. Instead, she had a spider in her hand, and he didn’t sense any other flesh and blood until she opened her hand and it bit him.”

Harry blinked. “I’ll remember that the next time I see Mrs. Zabini,” he said.

“You should.” Narcissa gave him a faint smile. “Many of your allies are dangerous, Harry, some of them more so than any wizard or witch left unallied with you—at least in Britain.”

“What about Indigena Yaxley?”

Narcissa felt her smile fade. “I misspoke, then,” she said. “There is at least one dangerous witch you do not have on your side.”

“Is there any way of getting her?” Harry’s face was intent. “Lucius told me a little bit about the debt of honor she has, when I asked, but it sounded as though she could choose to get out of it.”

Narcissa shook her head. “Debts of honor are a contrivance that very few families respect any more,” she said. “They’re not like life debts—not recognized by magic itself. In this case, Indigena’s nephew swore his loyalty to the Dark Lord, but ran away even before he fell, and pretended he’d never been a Death Eater; he was certainly never suspected in the Ministry. Nor did he respond to the Dark Lord’s call when he returned last summer.” She saw Harry’s hand move to rub the stump of his left wrist, perhaps unconsciously, and briefly let herself wonder if enough of her sister’s handiwork was undone to grant Harry a hand now. “Then Voldemort demanded a debt of honor

from the Yaxley family, a loyal servant in return for a disloyal servant. He could have chosen anyone he wanted. He chose Indigena, quite sensibly. It is her choice, her will, that binds her to the Dark Lord. And she hates traitors and those who forswear their vows; most of the Yaxleys do. She would look on someone like Severus or Lucius as blasted and damned. I fear you will never sway her, Harry.”

Harry’s face assumed the mild, stubborn expression Narcissa had seen there a few times just before he went out and did the impossible, including riding a dragon into a storm of the wild Dark. “I still might try, if it’s her choice and her magic wouldn’t punish her for turning away from Voldemort.”

Narcissa sighed. “At least promise me that you won’t go marching up to her on the next battlefield you see her on and try to sway her.”

Harry gave her a fleeting smile. “I promise.”

Then the first of their guests began to arrive, and Harry turned to welcome them, and Narcissa turned back to warding the room, wishing fretfully that she could be sure Harry wouldn’t try to persuade Indigena out of her allegiance. Indigena’s nephew was the only cowardly Yaxley in the history of the family that Narcissa could remember. If they chose a side at all, they stayed with that side, no matter how doomed it was; a Yaxley had fought at the Eagle Lord’s side even when he knew that Calypso McGonagall was bringing an earthquake down on them, according to legend.

And why should this one be different?

Snape knew it was all going to go wrong with the arrival of the first wizards and witches.

Oh, they were polite enough; most of them smiled, and took chairs in the growing circle of seats, provided by the Room of Requirement, with their smiles still intact. But they were separating themselves rigidly, sitting with either Light or Dark contingents, and when they looked at the wizards and witches across the ring from them, their faces wore nothing more neutral than frowns. Snape shook his head as he watched. He was sensitive enough to undercurrents, Merlin

knew, after a year of spying among the Death Eaters for Dumbledore and forcing himself to pay attention to not only the tiny gestures but what the tiny gestures added up to. Most people had come here not out of curiosity, but because they felt they couldn't afford to be left out of a meeting their enemies would attend. The dominant emotional tone of the gathering was belligerence, and nothing would persuade them to lay it down, unless Harry agreed to meet with the members of each allegiance separately.

Snape knew that wouldn't happen.

His gaze left the gathering and moved back to Harry, who remained near the door of the Room of Requirement and welcomed the new guests in. His courteous mask never faltered. He had obviously looked up any details of pureblood greetings he didn't know, and Snape had the satisfaction of seeing some of the cold masks falter, for a moment, as the strangers accepted more politeness than they'd counted on.

It wouldn't work, though. Their faces hardened again as they walked towards the circle.

Quietly, Snape cast a spell that would tell him if someone was influencing others with an emotional compulsion. Voldemort had sometimes used that to stir up enthusiasm for killing among his more sluggish Death Eaters, and it would be exactly the kind of tool that Harry's enemies would use to destroy something that he'd worked so hard on.

No trace of the spell came back to him. Snape felt his mouth tighten. So. It's only the fools' natural tempers.

On and on they came, Harry's old allies and new ones. A few Light wizards and witches were exchanging smiles with a few Dark ones now, but too little, too late. The meeting had been spoiled before they arrived, Snape knew. Harry's haste and hurrying probably had something to do with it, as did the fact that the Light wizards didn't trust the Dark ones to actually fight Voldemort, and the Dark ones didn't trust the Light ones not to hide their heads, now that the Light side had been trimmed of its last leader.

Snape allowed himself a single moment of hard satisfaction for that. Dumbledore was gone, and though Snape believed Harry should have absorbed the Headmaster's magic instead of storing it in a tie, of all things, he would not be a threat ever again.

Then he went back to studying the gathering, and shook his head. There were a few wizards and witches here he would have advised Harry not to invite, if he and Harry were on speaking terms that close. Gloriana Griffinsnest was so entirely under the domination of Augustus Starrise that she would do almost nothing without his permission, but in one thing she was firm, and that was her hatred of werewolves, since two of them had killed her parents. Her eyes had not moved from Remus Lupin since she came into the room, and Snape had seen her robes swirl and part, briefly revealing the silver knife she carried. She would kill Lupin in a moment if she thought she could get away with it.

Compton Belville sat like a black swan among the wizards on the Dark side of the circle, murmuring greetings and responses to questions with a blank look on his face. Snape had to fight to keep his snarl from his lips when the old wizard's gaze briefly touched his. Compton was timid in letters, and could sound like a fool; so long as he and Harry had communicated only by owl, Snape saw no reason to encourage his ward to drop the correspondence. In person, though, the foolishness was revealed for the act it was. Compton Belville, though eighty-four years old, was dangerous if he decided to be so. And now he could observe Harry close at hand.

And Augustus Starrise...Snape did not care if he was Harry's ally, not when the man's eyes lingered on several faces around the circle with that special contempt in them. He was looking at Snape that way, currently. Snape knew he would have cast a spell to determine which of the wizards in the room had either Muggle or Muggleborn parents. He would have sensed Tobias Snape's blood in Severus Snape's veins, and that Snape's mother had been a pureblood witch would matter little to him. Starrise lifted his lip as Snape watched. Combined with his eyes, they expressed a perfect, practiced, pureblood scorn.

Asking to have Augustus Starrise behave politely in any room that included halfblood witches and wizards was like asking a Kneazle to play nicely with pixies. Snape watched others become offended as they noted Starrise's scrutiny, and Lucius Malfoy watch Starrise all the while with a fixed air of hatred—they were too much alike for Lucius to do anything else—and ripples spread out from there, as wizards or witches who relied on others to guide them scrambled to adjust their positions to the emotions their guides were expressing.

Snape shot Harry a glance as he welcomed in the last guest, the French witch, who arrived in a cloud of shimmering silver hair and took a seat between the Light and Dark sides. It seemed Harry did suspect that not everything was perfect. Of course, his chin was up and his green eyes incredibly stubborn. He would not back off on holding the meeting now simply because of potential problems. He would persist until it collapsed.

Snape concealed a snarl. He would not be responsible for his actions if Belville or Starrise launched a spell at Harry. He wished that he could have simply stepped over the boy's barriers, or his own, to warn Harry about them, but Harry was stuck on handling their reconciliation slowly, and didn't want to talk about anything except that or Potions. Snape knew his warnings would have been unwelcome.

He concealed another snarl and turned back to the gathering. Harry had moved through a gap between the French witch's chair and her nearest neighbor's, and taken his place in the center of the circle. He turned in a slow circle himself, meeting everyone's eyes. He radiated power and confidence. Snape had to admit it made a difference from the trial, the last time Harry had been on such public display to a captive audience. This was more like his air during the press conference he'd held to warn the wizarding world of the danger of the wild Dark.

"Thank you for coming," Harry was saying, formally. "It has been decades since the last gathering of Dark and Light wizards this large. When I studied the historical records, the last time I could find a mention of one half so big was an alliance against the Dark Lord Grindelwald, in 1944. That fell apart after a few months of

dissonance.” He paused and gave a sharp smile in Compton Belville’s direction. “I hope this one will prove steadier.”

“Perhaps it would help if you told us what you intend, Harry,” said Paton Opalline, one of the few wizards here Snape would trust to stand at his back with a wand in his hand. He sat with his tattoos exposed and gleaming on his skin, probably to show the others that his family was at Harry’s disposal. “What are your goals for this alliance?”

Harry nodded. “I intend for us to fight Voldemort,” he said, and a surprising number of Dark wizards flinched at the name. Snape rolled his eyes, and did not care who saw him. “But not only that. When he is defeated—“

“If,” said Compton Belville, with the soft-voiced and utterly stalling kind of interruption he was so good at.

But Harry did not stumble and ask what Belville meant, as so many of his victims did. He merely turned to face him and flashed him a dangerous grin. “I plan to defeat Voldemort in a few years,” he said casually. “I certainly don’t intend for him to run about for decades and wreak havoc on my life and my brother’s.”

“Perhaps you could see your way clear towards telling us the prophecy, then,” said Belville, leaning forward, his face full of bloodless curiosity. “What exactly does it say? Why should we believe that you will defeat the Dark Lord?”

Harry paused for a long moment. Then he said, “Forgive me, sir, but I know that a traitor lurks among the ranks of my alliance. I have reason to believe that this traitor warned Voldemort about a battle that my allies and I fought in the autumn. Unless everyone here will consent to swear an oath promising to speak nothing of this meeting outside this room, then I cannot tell you the prophecy. There is too much danger that it might run back to my enemies.”

“To ask us to take such an oath is an insult!” Gloriana Griffinsnest exclaimed, clasping her hands together. “Would you really ask us to do such a thing, Lord—“

"I am no Lord."

Harry's flat declaration stopped Griffinsnest as effectively as Belville could have done, Snape noted with approval, but not for long. Then she was bustling forward again. "I have heard that you call yourself a vates, a guardian of free will for the magical creatures," she said stiffly, raising her head. "Is this a sign that you respect the free will of wizards and witches less, then?"

Harry shook his head. "It is a simple precaution, ma'am. Unless I have that assurance, it would be stupid to let my enemies have that prophecy."

"Then you are afraid of the Dark Lord," said Belville. Had it not been for the fact that Griffinsnest and Belville hated each other too much to cooperate, Snape would have thought they had arranged this, so perfectly were they playing off each other. "I did not know you were afraid of him."

"Of course I am," said Harry, so simply that it was hard to wrestle fear out of his tone. "He is a Parselmouth, in possession of knowledge of how to breed basilisks—"

"Via books he stole from me," said Arabella Zabini, her face gray with rage.

Harry inclined his head to her. "Nonetheless, stolen or not, he has the knowledge now," he continued. "He is also an absorbere, able to swallow magic. He has drained—Muggleborn children too young for Hogwarts, and I think his victims may be legion in a battle. He is a compeller, an Occlumens, and a master Legilimens, as well as able in Dark Arts from years of study between the time of Grindelwald and his return to Britain and first rise. He had an alliance with the sirens, though they may have broken free of him by now, and he has sent negotiators to the giants, though most have failed. He can possess others. Indigena Yaxley fights with him, and I have already seen how much damage her plants can do." Harry took a deep breath. "I also have information from a new source that Voldemort is stitching pieces of dead flesh together into beasts. I faced one on Midwinter that

looked like an enormous worm. The one I have been informed of is a dragon, or resembles one.”

“That is a Dark Art unpracticed for nearly two hundred years,” said Hawthorn Parkinson, who looked sick. “My—my husband, who was a necromancer, told me of the last time it happened. A monster in human form escaped among the Muggles and caused great damage before he could be stopped. One of the Muggle authors wrote a book about it, though of course most of the facts were wrong. Frankenstein, I think it was called.”

Harry nodded slightly. “I know he could animate the worm. I am unsure how he will bring the dragon to life, but I have no doubt that he will manage.”

Snape sat still in his chair. It might appear to anyone who looked at him that he was considering how much damage Voldemort’s beasts would do. He, however, was thinking of how Harry could have learned about the Dark Lord’s dragon. He could think of only two routes, neither of which pleased him.

Either Evan has been writing to him again, and he should know better than to believe the liar by now—

Or he has been opening the Occlumency link and stepping into the Dark Lord’s head. Damn him!

Snape sent Harry a furious glare just as Harry turned his way. Harry froze for a moment, eyes wide, then shook his head and set his shoulders and glared back. Snape sat back in his chair, suppressing his incandescent rage that his ward had taken yet another foolish risk, rather than coming and asking for help with his dreams and visions.

“How do we defeat him, when he has such armies?” That was one of the wizards from a minor Light family, Dawnborn or something of the kind. His eyes were wide and fearful.

Harry started to answer, but Edward Burke spoke before he could. “Why do you have to worry about that? You’ll just cower in your holes, which is the only activity proper to rabbits.”

The Light wizard squawked, and Augustus Starrise's voice rang out. "Do you claim that Dark wizards fought You-Know-Who in his first rise, Burke? They did not. They fawned at his heels as his hounds, or ran beside him as leashed slaves." His eyes found Lucius Malfoy's face.

Snape sat back in resignation as he saw Lucius lean forward. The circle was falling apart all along its fractures. Yes, Harry should have considered more carefully whom to invite.

"Some might say that, under the Imperius Curse or not, at least his servants saw battle, and often without him," Lucius murmured. He was using the kind of voice that did not sound loud, but could easily reach across the circle, and was the fiercer for being the softer. "They did not sit in their homes and wait for one wizard to lead them, as happened too often with Albus Dumbledore. Nor did they become first captives and then suicides."

Starrise stood in a single, flowing motion. He did not have the white staff bound with gold he had carried at the trial, or Snape would have feared for Lucius's life. But he was enraged enough that white, glowing sparks of wandless magic leaped about him. "Were you one of them?" he whispered. "Were you one of the bastards who did worse than rape my sister?"

Lucius merely leaned back in his chair and raised his eyebrows. "Did that happen to your sister? I had no idea. My humblest apologies, Starrise." His voice had no tone at all, which was worse mockery than laughter.

Starrise trembled as if he would rush forward. Gloriana Griffinsnest, beside him, fingered her silver knife and eyed Lupin. Hawthorn Parkinson sniffed once, and then focused on the knife; Snape could hear a low growl bubbling in her throat. Tybalt Starrise and Honoria Pemberley were tensed, bright grins on their faces. Snape did not know which way they would leap, but he was certain they would enjoy the chaos of it.

"Enough."

Snape winced. Harry had enchanted his voice to throb in the ears of everyone who heard it. Most wizards and witches fell back clutching their heads. Lucius and Starrise never took their gazes from each other, but they were the only ones who didn't.

"This is obviously not working," said Harry, with firmness and no disappointment in his tone. "Very well. I have thought of another plan, one I that considered as less preferable than this one. However, perhaps it will give you time to restrain your tempers and become accustomed to working beside wizards and witches of an opposing allegiance." Snape turned his eyes to Harry, along with everyone else, and saw Harry shrouded with a mixture of deep green light, one of the colors that symbolized Dark, and blue phoenix flame. It did make a striking tableau, and it kept most everyone transfixed while Harry spoke. "This is an alliance of Light and Dark, and always will be. I will never Declare for either Dark or Light. I am not a Lord. I am vates, and I will work for the rights of magical creatures. That does not mean I consider them more important my own species—and vice versa.

"Paton Opalline asked me what I wished the alliance to accomplish. While the first answer is finding ways to fight Voldemort, the next answer, and the more profound, is to find new ways of living. Most magical creatures are bound under webs that prevent them from coexisting equally, or at all, with witches and wizards. Light and Dark battle generation after generation, with useless slaughter in the name of names. Injustice prevails in many wizarding families, and not only child abuse. Muggleborns and their children are scorned by purebloods." His gaze came to Starrise, and it was hard, but it didn't soften when he looked at Lucius, either. "I would like to change all of that, and anyone who wishes to help me is welcome."

Silence gripped the room for a long time. Then Paton said, his voice still as cheerful as before, "What is this second opportunity for meeting that you were talking about, Harry?"

"On the spring equinox," said Harry softly. "The old day of reconciliation, of ending wars and making up family quarrels. The day when day and night, Light and Dark, are of equal length. I would invite anyone who wishes to come to an enormous gathering, not held in Hogwarts—"

“Where, then?” Compton Belville asked.

“In a place I will reveal to those who choose to come, and only those,” said Harry simply. “And I will require oaths, before you enter the area, that you will not cast spells save in self-defense. We are going to talk about revolution, but bloodless revolution only.”

“Such a thing has not been done since Merlin’s time.” That was the French witch, leaning forward and looking at Harry with interest. “The memories of the Veela are long, and such oaths of peace were rare even then. Will people from other countries who wish to attend the gathering be welcome?”

Harry bowed slightly to her. “Anyone who wishes, yes.”

“There could be centaurs there, then?” Augustus Starrise asked.

“And werewolves?” Gloriana Griffinsnest asked.

“And Muggleborns?” That was Edward Burke, who looked dismayed.

“Yes, anyone who wishes to attend and will swear the oaths.” Harry looked at them and shook his head. “I will remain here until everyone is left, to make sure the remains of this gathering do not explode into violence. It troubles me, indeed, that this had to happen, that so many powerful adult wizards in Britain will surrender themselves to names and no more than that.”

His tone was perfect, Snape had to concede, not exactly scolding but full of proud and stern dismay. More than a few people bowed their heads and looked chastised before they slowly began to leave. Snape waited until he was sure that most of them were gone, and the small crowd around Harry had cleared, before he began working his own way forward.

Harry was speaking with Paton Opalline when he arrived. Paton took one look at Snape’s face and raised his eyebrows. “It seems that your father wishes to speak with you, Harry,” he said, “and I know better

than to stand between a parent and child. My brother gave me a scar I still bear for it.” He stepped back.

“He’s not my father,” said Harry.

His voice was querulous, sulky, to Snape’s ears, and it was that or it was the words that made Snape lose control of his temper—though he managed to keep his voice soft, so that no one would have reason to look their way.

“You have been going into the Dark Lord’s mind in your dreams,” he whispered harshly.

Harry stiffened. “What makes you think I’ve done that?” he asked, and his eyes met Snape’s, wide and guileless. Occlumency shields were guarding his emotions, so that Snape couldn’t read, even with a focused Legilimency probe, anything to contradict what he was saying. If Snape hadn’t taught Harry to do that, and in part to lie, himself, he might even have believed him.

If small winged pigs had been swooping overhead, perhaps.

“How else could you have learned about the Dark Lord’s use of a flesh dragon?” Snape snarled. “Unless Rosier has written you.”

Harry shook his head. “No, he hasn’t.”

“Then it was the dreams,” said Snape, and other emotions than pure anger were stirring in him now: resentment for Harry’s disregard of his own safety, and fear, and resentment of the fear, and a marrow-deep frustration. “You have done many things in the past month that you have not informed me of.” And he was thinking, now, of the fact that Harry had obviously made up with Draco and not him, and of Harry becoming Black heir, and of the fact that Harry had mostly arranged this meeting before he bothered to tell Snape about it.

“I didn’t want you to worry.”

Snape’s eyes snapped away from his memories and back to Harry. The words were soft and laden with poison. Harry’s gaze

sparked with his own resentment and frustration. Snape could see the progress they had made in the past month falling to pieces in them.

“What have I said about that?” Snape said, more softly and more coldly than before. His anger was rending him again. It was one thing not to be able to protect Harry from suddenly appearing dangers like Dumbledore and Evan Rosier, it was another for Harry to have to face one only he could face, like the wild Dark, and it was another, quite another, for Harry to hide information from him that would have aided Snape in protecting him—for Harry to do things that damaged Snape’s role of guardian.

“That I have to trust you.” Harry’s voice rose a notch higher. Snape could see Draco hovering anxiously off to the side, but his mother had her hand on his shoulder and wasn’t letting him approach. “You don’t see that I do trust you. Merlin! Would I pour this much effort into arguing with you, would I care this much, if I didn’t trust you, didn’t love you? But that’s not the only role I have. I have to be a leader, have to do what I can to protect others. He hasn’t sensed me so far; I promise he hasn’t. I’m learning to distinguish between the dreams I get, the ones where he’s dreaming and the ones where I see what he’s doing and the ones where he tries to trap me. I know what the traps feel like, and he’s not using them.”

If he had ever been more sheerly infuriated at any point in his life, Snape could not remember it. “Perhaps he senses you,” he whispered. “Perhaps he is merely waiting you out. Did you think of that?”

Harry snorted. “Would he really let me see his plans that way? I don’t think he would. He would use a false vision instead. And I told you, I know what those feel like. He lured me to the Weasleys this summer with a misty dream of him attacking my brother. He’s not using those now. I’ve been watching him, and he can’t sense me. I haven’t been jumping into the connection like I did in September. I promise.”

“Why will you not let us protect you?”

Harry apparently couldn't speak for a moment. Then he snarled, "Because you can't. I'll never be safe. I've got used to that. You still haven't. And I'm not a child, and the ways you try to protect me are all ways you would try to protect a child. If I thought you would take the information I have about my danger and discuss it with me like an adult, then I would give it to you. But you don't, and you won't." He paused, then added, "Maybe that's the way I don't trust you, sir. I don't trust you to remember that this is a war, and I have to do my share of the work."

He turned and strode rapidly from the Room of Requirement, giving his head a single sharp shake when Draco tried to accompany him. Snape knew he was probably going off alone to brood.

He controlled his temper with a combination of Occlumency and sheer ruthlessness. He would go back to his quarters, conjure targets, and destroy them. Then he would brew potions. But not here, not here.

"Trying to raise a child is difficult," said Opalline. He didn't put his hand on Snape's shoulder, merely regarded him with compassion. "Particularly when they begin to insist that they are children no longer."

Snape only nodded once, curtly, and strode from the room. He hated vulnerability, and he hated helplessness, and he felt as if he were helpless on all sides, with his tie to a life that Harry refused to guard.

Interlude: The Serpent Strikes

February 17th, 1996

Dear Lord Voldemort:

By the incantation to take a letter directly to you I send this, with information that I hope and believe you will need. I have heard of the vengeance of Dark Lords upon those unworthy servants who dare to disturb their important plans, and I know that I have not been honored with Your Lordship's confidences, but I believe that you must hear this news, that it is important and will continue to be so.

I attended a meeting today with the rest of those fools who continue to overlook me and think I do not matter. In this case, I was very literally overlooked. Not a single eye alighted upon me. I can be ignored, but they do not know the depth of the cunning that hides behind my face, and they can never be bothered to find out. I believe they hold my bloodline against me, although I have done nothing that would taint it further than it is already tainted.

The meeting was a short one. No one could reach an accord, and Potter—so I call him, for though he rejects his family name he certainly has no claim to any other, and I will not call him by his first name alone, as if I were his friend—dismissed us, calling for a meeting on the vernal equinox. He will not tell us where the meeting is to be held until each person contacts him, assents to coming, and swears an oath not to use magic except in self-defense. I think he will find the numbers at this supposed reconciliation meeting between Light and Dark smaller than he thinks he will.

More than that, though, my lord, I sensed a weakness in the wards of the school. It seems that Albus Dumbledore's death tearing up the wards was not rumor or idle speculation after all. He has weakened them, and the weak point seemed to be below the Room of Requirement. I cast a spell that would enable me to see the wards—as no one still thinks I am worth anything, that was easy enough—and watched them running downward. The Headmistress cannot have found the weak point yet, however, or she would have sent the children home while she reestablished the wards. The movement of

the spells was slow, but given that they were moving at all, I would estimate the waxing and waning cycle as no longer than a day. May this information be useful to you, my Lord, as you plan an attack on Hogwarts. I would suggest Draco Malfoy as a target, if your servant may have the cheek to hint at where you direct your illustrious might. The boy stays close to Potter at all times, and is rumored to be starting a formal courting ritual with him soon. His loss would break Potter.

With sincerity,

The Serpent.

February 19th, 1996

Dear Serpent:

I will use the name that you continue to prefer, so that if this letter falls into the hands of your erstwhile "allies" it will not reveal you. Lord Voldemort has directed me to write back to you, and to thank you for your information. Harry's meeting on the vernal equinox sounds interesting, and we will trust you to report what happens there to us. Make sure that you are invited.

We also thank you for the information on the wards, though we had already attained this from another source. (Strike more quickly, my dear Serpent. I would hate to see you no longer of use! My lord laughs most heartily whenever he receives one of your letters.) My lord has also chosen how best to employ their weakness. He will not attack Draco Malfoy at this time. There is another set of people connected to Harry whom he will bleed instead.

A most curious thing, my dear Serpent: When we broke the charm to disguise your handwriting on your second message, the one informing us of Harry's presence at his press conference, we learned that you are apparently ambidextrous. Are you, by any chance, able to take the Dark Mark soon? My lord welcomes one who, as in the old legends of ambidextrous wizards, could wield his wand with either hand.

May affection hold you like the embrace of thorns,

Indigena Yaxley.

Chapter Sixty-Eight: Stolen Child

“I think that if you just apologized—“

“Draco.” Harry controlled himself with an effort, which in this case meant he kept his voice calm, though cool, and didn’t look up from the letter he was writing. “We’ve been over this. I’ve tried all the compromises I can think of. I’ve told him I love him, I trust him, that I understand what he’s trying to do and why he’s trying to do it. I can’t just agree with him, though, and I think he’d take an apology the same way right now. When I work out what I actually want to say, then I still have to say it to him without shouting, and so far that hasn’t worked.” He looked up at Draco, who was leaning on his bed on one elbow and watching Harry as he wrote the letter on top of his Transfiguration text. “So stop talking to me about Snape right now.”

Draco snorted. “I don’t see why it’s so hard. You love and trust me, and you made up with me just fine.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “And you actually made an effort, Draco. Snape seems caught in his own little world, one where I’m a child to be protected and he’s the father to do it, and he and I have no other roles to play. He actually got huffy last weekend when Opalline said that he was my father and I said he wasn’t.”

Draco said, “It is very disturbing to hear Professor Snape being talked about as if he were paternal.”

“See?” Harry shook his head. “This needs to be fixed, but neither of us can fix it in the moods we’re in now.” He leaned back on his own elbow, disturbing the Many snake in his pocket, but she just squirmed into a new position and went back to sleep. Argutus was more vocal.

“What are you writing?” he asked, as he slithered along Harry’s shoulder and draped himself to look down at the letter. He still couldn’t read English, but that didn’t keep him from trying. So far, he claimed to be able to recognize “a” and “s.” “Is it a challenge to the other snake-speaker, so that you can fight him in a duel to the death?”

"You've been listening to too many fey stories in the Forbidden Forest again," said Harry, deciding that he could do worse than just close the letter with a simple thanks for the time the reader had put into reading it. "Not every war ends in a duel to the death."

"But lots of them do!" Argutus wound his head in several directions, which for him was the equivalent of bouncing up and down. "You could challenge him to a duel to the death, and then all the snakes in the world would come and surround you in a ring. And you would defeat him in a blast of fire, and the snakes would tell the legend of the other snake-speaker's death for the rest of time."

"You've been listening to the Many." Harry started to read his letter over again from the beginning. "Believe me, Argutus, most snakes aren't that concerned with me and Voldemort unless they actually come into contact with us. Even Sylarana only decided to come to me because she wanted someone to compliment her and feed her, and she decided that, since she'd seen me fighting in the Forest with Voldemort, I was able to talk to snakes and could do it. There's no mystical bond between Parselmouths and snakes."

"The Runespoors said there could be," said Argutus, sounding hurt.

"Do we have a mystical bond?" Harry raised his eyebrow and looked at the Omen snake.

Argutus lifted his head and flicked his tongue rapidly three times, one of his signs of irritation. "We could, if I was just a different kind of snake or you were a different kind of human," he said primly.

"Exactly my point." Harry turned back to his letter.

"I'm itchy," said Argutus, running his neck up and down Harry's. "Scratch me."

"My nails aren't sharp enough." Harry gently pushed the snake in the direction of the head of the bed, which had a few sharp ridges he could rub himself against. Argutus was shedding his skin for the first time, and continually wanted someone to oblige him by helping to

scratch his skin off, and continually complained that nothing was sharp enough to actually tear the skin and give him relief.

Argutus huffed at him and slithered away. Harry shook his head, completed his reading of the letter, and then looked up to see Draco smiling at him with barely concealed amusement. "What?" he asked, reaching up to his neck, thinking Argutus might have left a bit of shed scales there.

"You have no idea how cute you look, arguing with him like that," said Draco smugly. "Even if I can't understand what you're saying. And I remember that I chose Argutus for you when I watch him with you. That's my gift you get on so well with."

"I am not cute," said Harry, because he didn't even have an answer to the rest of it. He lifted the letter to the Daily Prophet. "Well, here it is. I'm asking them to consider running an article about the equinox meeting, so that as many people as possible know about it. Want to go to the Owlery with me so I can post it?"

Draco made a face as he stood. "That means that Mud—" Harry's gaze cut him, and he flinched. "Uh, I mean, Muggleborns can be there, doesn't it?"

"You heard what I answered Edward Burke last week," Harry said as he turned away. "Yes, if they'll contact me about coming and swear the oath. You really should get over this prejudice of yours, Draco," he added, in the most chiding manner possible. He wasn't going to condemn Draco for his beliefs, but he was going to try to persuade him out of them. "After all, it's not as though there's any difference between Muggleborns and purebloods when it comes to magical skill, is there?"

"Of course there is!" Draco sounded scandalized. Harry made sure to keep his laughter silent. Luckily, he was facing forward as they went through the Slytherin common room, so Draco couldn't see the grin on his face. "Purebloods have been the most powerful wizards and witches throughout history, Harry."

“And I suppose you’re stronger than Hermione, then?” Harry asked, as if this were merely a question in which he had an academic interest.

Draco made an inarticulate sound at his back. He knew very well that he was not stronger than Hermione in sheer magical strength, though he probably knew more spells, and he hated it. “That’s not the point,” he said, finally.

“Really? I thought it was.”

“I mean—I meant, that is, that pureblood wizards are strong in other ways than sheer magical strength,” said Draco haughtily. “They have a completely different culture backing them than Muggleborns. Muggleborns lose one culture when they enter ours, and then they can’t adapt.”

“Then Zacharias Smith’s education has been sadly neglected,” said Harry. “I’ll be sure to tell him.”

There was a long silence behind him. They got up three whole staircases before Draco gave in and said, “What does that mean?”

“Hermione manipulated him with a pureblood ritual in the dueling club last week,” said Harry, grinning at him over his shoulder. “But she must have been making it up, because, as you said, Muggleborns can’t adapt. And Zacharias is a pureblood, so he should have realized the ritual was false. Such a sad gap in his education.”

“Look,” said Draco, and then stopped.

“Yes?” Harry kept his eyes on the staircases ahead of him, and his voice as free as possible of either smugness or laughter.

“Granger’s a freak of nature,” said Draco firmly.

“Oh,” said Harry, with a nod of his head. “So if a Muggleborn is powerful and tries as hard as she can to learn pureblood culture, then she’s a freak of nature? But you won’t deny that she might be able to be and do those things?”

"That's right," said Draco, sounding relieved.

"Then tell me," said Harry. "If it's neither power nor culture, then what does separate purebloods from Muggleborns?"

Draco seized his shoulder and spun him around, glaring at him. Harry looked up at him and cocked an eyebrow, secretly pleased to note that he no longer had to look so far up. He was growing again, and was probably only an inch shorter than Draco now.

"You can't argue this way with just anyone," Draco said. "You've got to understand that, Harry. There are thick, old prejudices in some of your allies from the meeting that you can't hammer down with mild, reasoned arguments like this."

"I know," said Harry. "But some of them, I will be able to convince just by showing how stupid they're being. The smarter ones, at least. And you're already getting there, Draco." He held Draco's eyes calmly. "You can't deny that Hermione exists and that she's done these things, because that would be even more stupid than holding these prejudices in the first place. So you'll need to start shedding them, unless you want to act like an idiot and shut your eyes to reality."

"It's the blood that separates us, Harry," said Draco steadily. "And you know it. Purebloods have pureblood ancestors. And you might consider that silly and separatist, but there you are. We don't have Muggles for parents. We don't get torn away from one world at eleven years old and plunked down in another. Merlin! You ought to understand that part, at least. You were raised in the wizarding world yourself."

"A very small part of it," said Harry quietly. "I learned most of what I knew about it from books. And one thing that my parents were never very successful at teaching me, even when they tried, was that only certain people could inherit certain things, because they were pureblood or Dark or Light. I learned the Dark pureblood rituals, Draco. I wasn't born to them, if you can even be born to such a thing. And as for having no contact with non-magical people, pureblood families have Squib children sometimes, and you know it."

Draco let him go with a scowl. "It's still different," he muttered. "I don't expect you to understand, Harry, I really don't, but it's about family. That's not something that people are going to give up easily."

"I know," said Harry. "I do know that, Draco. But saying that they won't give it up easily isn't the same as saying that they'll never give it up at all, or that I can't get some people to realize what blind gits they're being."

"You really do mean it, don't you?" Draco asked resignedly as they started to climb towards the Owlery again. "You want to change the way people live. That's what you said at the meeting."

"Yes," said Harry.

Draco sighed. "I don't know why I'm doing this," he complained to the ceiling. "Since I don't even believe in half of what you're spouting, and I'm a pureblood, born to lounge around and be served delicate sweets by house elves. But I'll tell you to start with the children first, Harry. I was thinking the other day that I didn't want to kill Muggleborns because I know some of them. It's different when you think about killing someone of a different kind of blood, and when they have faces. So you'll have better luck with Millicent than with her father, for example."

Harry turned around and smiled at him. "Thanks, Draco. I really do appreciate it."

"Someone has to protect you when you're being blind," Draco replied. "I—"

Harry dropped to one knee abruptly on the steps, his letter fluttering out of his hand as he slammed it to his scar. It had started bleeding. Harry tried to breathe through the pain that possessed every inch of his body, his mind racing. Was Voldemort here at Hogwarts? That was the only thing he could imagine that would start his scar flaring this way.

“Harry?” Draco’s voice, and even the touch of his hands on Harry’s shoulder, were distant, and no more important than blocks of wood.

Harry opened his eyes. He found himself in an unfamiliar house, looking straight at a window through which he could see a dark sky. This wasn’t now, then—it was still early afternoon—but some time at least a few hours in the future.

He turned, and saw a long trail of blood on the floor of what looked like an ordinary Muggle hallway. Harry followed it, not knowing if he was moving his body or not. He was so entirely gone into the vision that he couldn’t feel or hear Draco anymore.

The trail of blood ended in a room with Muggle devices shoved back to the walls, and an awful kind of rack set up in the middle of it. Harry felt his stomach heave as he stared at the two bodies hanging on the various branches of the thorn tree that had grown up through the floor. He knew them, though he hadn’t seen them in almost ten years, and had only met them once. This would be his Muggle aunt and cousin, the Dursleys.

Their blood ran from star-shaped holes in their bodies, probably cut with the help of knives or magic. It was painted over their faces in careful masks, patterns that Harry recognized from looking at some of the more unpleasant books Regulus had gifted him with. Dark magic, evil magic, magic that could be used only when the victims of the ritual were blood relatives of a target.

He heard a distant roar as he stood there, and he knew that Voldemort and the storm he would have raised from this blood were coming. It made sense that Voldemort would strike at the Dursleys, really, Harry thought numbly. They were the most vulnerable of his blood relatives. Connor, Lily, and James were all too well-protected.

The vision ended as Harry felt the hurricane gathering closer and closer at his back. If Voldemort completed that ritual, he thought from deep in his daze, he wouldn’t be able to defend himself against it. It would strike through the common bond that linked Petunia to Lily, and Lily to him—a bond that he wouldn’t be able to get rid of unless he somehow tore every bit of shared genetic material from his body.

And it would likely hurt Connor, too, and perhaps even his parents. It would depend on whether Voldemort thought he needed to get rid of them. Connor, at the least, he probably would kill.

Harry sat up, slowly, leaning against the wall of the staircase. He knew that he was moving too slowly—though not fast enough for Draco, who was shouting in his face—but he needed to get his bearings. He could not remember where the Dursleys lived, which meant he couldn't ride his broom there, and he wouldn't want to Apparate based on a glimpse of a bloodied, altered room several hours in the future. The Knight Bus was a possible solution, but he still had to learn their address. He hoped that Dumbledore would have kept it among his papers, and that McGonagall would still have those papers.

"Harry!" Draco was insisting on his attention. "What's the matter?"

"I had a vision," said Harry. His tongue felt thick in his mouth. He didn't know if that was from the searing pain that had finally left him, or the shock of the vision. "Voldemort's going to be attacking my Muggle aunt and cousin, I think. He'll use blood magic to get at me and Connor."

"You can't trust those visions," Draco said desperately, kneeling down next to him. "I didn't hear much of your conversation with Snape at the meeting, but I heard enough. Surely Voldemort could have sent you a vision to entrap you and make you do just this? Go running off to protect these Muggles, and straight into a trap?"

Harry let out a sharp breath. "I don't know. The vision could have come because of the blood connection we share, Draco. The magic of families will sometimes reach out and attempt to protect its members like that." Draco was nodding slowly, reluctantly; he'd probably heard of at least one instance where one member of the Malfoy family had a vision of another in trouble. "I have to look in one of the books Regulus got me." He strangled his own impatience, which was both trying to calculate how much time he might have left and get him to dash to the Headmistress's office right away. "You're

right. This could be a trap. I'll have to look up this kind of vision in the books and see if this is actually likely, that it could be a real thing."

Draco's hands were shaking as he supported Harry to his feet. Harry glanced curiously up at him. "Are you all right, Draco?"

"You were on the floor in such intense pain that you stopped breathing for a little while, you prat," Draco said. "What do you think?"

Harry pressed his hand briefly, in apology, and then they started back down the stairs in the direction of their bedroom, and Harry's trunk, where he'd put the books Regulus gave him.

There is a blood ritual that can be performed with any blood relative in the first two generations of connection. Thus grandparents can be used against their grandchildren, and second cousins can be used against each other. Further than that, this ritual cannot bind them.

The words beat in Harry's head like wings as he lurched against the side of the Knight Bus. Draco, sitting in the armchair across the aisle, reached out as if to help him, and then lost his own balance and launched sideways. Harry heard him mutter something uncomplimentary about "Muggle-based" methods of transportation.

Connor, who was sitting in the chair in front of Harry, turned around with a grin. He had balanced himself perfectly, somehow. "Fun, isn't it?" he yelled, as the Bus spun around a corner and then shot down a street that Harry was glad he couldn't see too clearly.

Harry ground his teeth and didn't say anything. The vision he'd seen still blazed in his head, and the words of the Black book he'd looked up the ritual in still pounded in his blood, his heartbeat.

His blood.

The ritual must be begun precisely at the turn of nightfall, the moment of sunset. The victims—the ritual may be done with one victim alone, but every sacrifice gives it an added potency—must be trapped without the use of magic that binds or confines. The only magic used in this ritual must be that which draws blood.

Harry heard Auror Moody's voice from the front of the Bus, urging the driver, Ernie Prang, to go faster. Though that would mean more jostling, Harry was glad for it. They were still probably an hour from sunset, but it was February, not Midsummer, and the daylight was waning fast.

Tonks, who was sitting opposite from Moody, had already turned to him a few times with different faces and tried to cheer him out of his bad mood, but it was hard for Harry to be comforted. The vision was still present whenever he closed his eyes, and the book had said that it would be present for an unnatural period of time, unless he died from the magic raised by the blood ritual.

The ritual relies on star-shaped cuts. What "star-shaped" means has been widely debated, but in general stars with five points are used (though four-pointed ones may be cut as well, with no apparent loss of potency). The victims must be marked on every limb and on their torsos, and their hands and feet removed. Then their faces must be painted with the blood in the shape of a Guile mask (see the description on page 263), and their bodies impaled, preferably on a thorn. This operation must be completed before midnight. If it is, then a storm will come to the caster's call. Named a 'blood-gale,' this will tear through the shared bloodline at the caster's command, destroying any specified blood relative of the sacrificed victims within two generations of connection.

On occasion, this ritual has been thwarted by a vision—the family bloodline reaching out to defend itself. This happens most often with Lord-level wizards and witches. The vision, which usually comes to the intended victim of the blood-gale, will show the completion of the ritual several hours in advance, and thus warns the victim in time, hopefully, to prevent the sacrifice. The vision lingers behind the eyes, burning, for up to a month, or, in one case, six months. It gives no guarantee, however, that the victim can actually thwart the completion of the ritual. And it cannot be controlled, either compelled to appear by a victim who knows that his family may be in danger, or stopped by the caster.

Harry leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes. He'd read the book, and he'd discussed with Draco the possibility that this was a trap, and Draco had reluctantly agreed that it didn't seem likely, not when the vision would come in spite of everything Voldemort could do. But he'd insisted on taking proper precautions, and everything he said was so sensible that Harry had agreed to it.

They'd gone at once to the Headmistress. Though pale-faced, she had told Harry that, yes, Albus had retained information on the Dursleys, as he had on almost everything connected with "Lily's boys," which he usually referred to Harry and Connor as in his own writing. Their address was Number Four Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey.

Harry tensed against the impulse to go charging off, and firecalled the Minister from McGonagall's hearth. Scrimgeour had agreed without complaint when he heard the vision to ward Lily and James as tightly as he could, just in case Voldemort intended to send Death Eaters to sacrifice them at sunset. If they were the targets of the blood-gale, and Voldemort did manage to kill the Dursleys, there was little any guards could do to stop it.

But Harry, of course, didn't intend that Voldemort's ritual should succeed. He abhorred the thought of someone dying simply because they were his relatives, when they'd done nothing to attract Voldemort's attention, and he would have ignored them otherwise.

That done, he would have been all for calling the Knight Bus and going to the Dursleys' house himself, in the company of Draco, who refused to stay back, and Connor, to make sure that he wouldn't be left behind as a target, held only by Hogwarts' weakened wards. But Scrimgeour had said—well, insisted, really—on sending two Aurors, and Tonks and Moody were both skilled, experienced, and trustworthy enough that Harry had accepted.

It made sense. Voldemort would surely have people in place already, since he would know that Harry might receive a vision like this. The Death Eaters were unlikely to move before sunset, since they would have to confine their prey without binding spells, and the easiest way to do that was inside their house. But while Harry thought he could

face them alone, he had to admit that it made sense to have two battle-tested adults come along with him. Other Aurors would arrive later, nearer sunset, to help if they were needed, to catch Voldemort and some of his Death Eaters if they could.

Harry had asked the Minister why he was so determined to help. Scrimgeour had wrinkled his brow as if the question were a stupid one, and said, "When the wind blows, Harry, you don't pretend it isn't blowing. And I'd rather get the good from this ill wind, by helping the one Lord-level wizard alive who doesn't seem to have an interest in corrupting my Ministry."

Harry had nodded his thanks, and then they'd waited for Tonks and Moody to come through the fireplace. Moody had cast a curse first thing to test Harry's vigilance, and Harry had blocked it with a shield. Moody grinned, his familiar-strange face—Harry had seen it across the desk for months at a time in Defense Against the Dark Arts class, but of course that had been as Mulciber's mask—fierce and half-mad. Harry had heard Moody described as the wildest of the Aurors. It made sense.

"A chance to punish them as they should be punished," Moody had snarled, and slapped his wand so hard against his hand that Harry had thought for a moment it would break. "I like this mission."

Tonks had rolled her eyes and whispered at Harry from beneath her mop of currently long, currently blue, hair, "He's hated most of the missions Burke's given him. Complained that they aren't half as challenging as the ones when he was young."

Harry had nodded, and then they'd gone outside Hogwarts to catch the Knight Bus. The Ministry had no one who knew the area where the Dursleys lived well enough to Apparate in or create a Portkey, and no one magical lived very near on the Floo Network. Once Tonks and Moody saw the street, they could contact the other Aurors and give them a detailed enough image of it for Apparition.

"Here," Moody said, his voice sharp enough to cut Harry's absorption in a moment. "Stop here."

Harry looked up, or at least looked up once he'd recovered from the Knight Bus throwing him into the seat in front of him as it jerked to a stop. They were on a street that stirred vague memories in him. He thought he'd seen it the one time Lily brought him to meet the Dursleys. The sign said nothing about it being Privet Drive, though.

Moody turned back to look at him, teeth bright. "Don't want to alarm our little friends by arriving on the street itself in the Bus," he said.

Harry nodded. The Knight Bus was rather noticeable. Death Eaters might have seen them already, but once they got out of the Bus, they would be under Moody's expert Disillusionment Charms. They were more likely to think it was normal wizarding travelers.

At least, so Harry hoped. If not, the best the Death Eaters could do, since it was still half an hour to sunset, was try to stop Harry and his companions, and he was ready if they tried that. He called, and his magic swirled around him. He also touched the pocket of his robes, where the Slytherin tie with Dumbledore's magic stored in it rested. He still hadn't figured out a way to cleanse that power, but he had less compunction about using it against Death Eaters than just about anyone else.

Moody cast the Disillusionment Charm on himself, then on Connor, Draco, and Harry. Harry shivered a bit as the spell spiraled down over him like a cold, rotten egg. Tonks had already changed her features to that of a nondescript woman in ordinary wizarding robes, to give any watching Death Eaters an excuse for the Bus stopping here in the first place. She ambled off the Bus, looked around several times, and began wandering up the street, muttering and comparing addresses on a piece of parchment in her hand. Harry relaxed a bit. Tonks was in danger, that was true, but she was in less danger than most other Aurors in the same situation, if only because she so emphatically did not look like an Auror. She would find an out-of-the-way place where other Aurors could Apparate in.

Moody guided them off under the Disillusionment Charm, and they went slowly towards the street that Harry knew must be Privet Drive. Behind them, the Bus charged away like a mad thing. Draco gave

another mutter about “Muggle-based transportation,” but fell silent quickly enough.

Privet Drive was a very Muggle place, Harry decided almost at once. The houses were small, and square, and neat, and looked as if their owners’ greatest ambition was for them to have as few distinguishing features as possible. Here and there a different kind of fence surrounded the snow-dusted gardens, or a different kind of curtain hung in a window, but altogether, it was uniform and devoid of magic. Harry shook his head. There are wizards in hiding, though. We have to remember that, that we’re almost certainly being watched.

Number Four had no one obviously standing outside it. Harry swallowed. He wondered if the rooms he’d seen in his vision were inside it, not blood-spattered right now, but about to be in another twenty minutes. The light above them and around them had turned red, as if in anticipation.

Harry arrived at the door and knocked, once, not yet taking off the Disillusionment Charm.

A loud voice shouted from inside, “Muuuum!” A moment later, footsteps sounded, coming towards the door. Harry tensed, thinking the Death Eaters might take the opportunity to attack, but nothing had happened yet. Besides, Moody would be standing at his back, watching the street, and his magical eye could see through Invisibility Cloaks and most other means of concealment.

A woman opened the door. Harry stared, but, try as he might, he could see barely any resemblance to his mother in her face. This woman had lived a perfectly ordinary life, he thought, and her face had querulous lines and laughter lines, and her eyes had a tendency to squint. She did not look as if she had ever seen the blast of a sacrifice burning, which was the thing Harry remembered best about Lily from his childhood.

Moody muttered a quick spell to make the doorstep and door of Number Four unnoticeable for a few moments, and then dropped the Disillusionment Charms. The woman, whom Harry knew must be his

Aunt Petunia, reeled back, clutched at the door, and then put one hand over her mouth. Harry thought she was suppressing a scream.

He stepped forward, letting the movement draw her eyes to him. "Aunt Petunia?" he asked.

She froze for a moment, as though that combination of words was one she'd never expected to hear, and then looked at him. Harry saw her recognize him—by his green eyes, if not as the little boy she'd met once nine years ago.

"You," she said. "Harry." Her eyes found Connor for a moment, flinching away from Draco and Moody as too obviously "wizarding." "And you. Connor. Her boys." The words were poisonous. "What do you want? What are you doing here? Bringing this sort of—of freakishness to our doorstep?" Her hand scrabbled at the door like a rat's claw.

Draco stiffened. "This is your aunt, Harry?" he asked, his own voice icy. "Muggle or not, there's no excuse for such poor breeding." He lifted his head and managed to look down his nose at Petunia, though she was taller than he was.

"The freakishness is already here, Aunt Petunia," said Harry, ignoring Draco entirely. "Did Mum ever tell you about a wizard called Voldemort?"

Petunia bowed her head, and her cheeks grew paler. "That name," she whispered. "That man!"

"He's targeted your family," said Harry. "He plans to sacrifice you at sunset today. I came to stop it, but we don't have much time. I think his servants are already here, watching. May we come in?"

Petunia nodded as if overwhelmed, and stepped mechanically backwards. Harry went in first, but Connor wasn't far behind him, looking around the Muggle house with open curiosity. Harry wasn't sure what was stranger to him, personally: the furnishings, such as the unmoving pictures, or the fact that he couldn't sense any magic in the house at all except what they brought with them.

“Muuuum!”

An apparent half-giant watered down and made to grow sideways instead of up came waddling down the hall. Harry blinked. That must be Dudley. The vision hadn't shown him just what his cousin would look like while still alive. He looked grotesquely fat, that was how he looked.

“Who're they?” he asked, staring at Moody. Moody's magical eye rolled around to point at him, and Dudley shrieked and backed away, waving his hands in the air as if he thought that would make Moody cease to exist.

“Friends, Dudders,” said Petunia in a voice which had lost all its tone. “Go to the kitchen, all right? Sit in the kitchen. Mummy will be along in a moment.”

Dudley hesitated a moment, eyeing all four of them as if he thought they might chop him apart and use him for Potions ingredients, and then turned and lurched back up the hall. Petunia returned her gaze to Harry.

“We should all be in one place, shouldn't we?” she whispered. “Just in case they try to take us while we're isolated.”

Harry nodded, wondering now just how much Petunia knew. Lily had claimed that Petunia was jealous of her magic and had cut off contact with her completely, but this sounded like Petunia knew at least a little about the Death Eaters.

“Yes,” he said. “You should call your husband, too. Uncle Vernon?” he added, when Petunia just stared at him.

“Vernon's dead,” Petunia said shortly. “A car accident, two years ago.” She shook her head, as if asking herself why in the world she was discussing this with freakish wizarding strangers, and then turned and led the way into the kitchen. Her back was thin, her shoulders set with determination.

Harry followed her, and found Dudley cowering on the other side of a large table. "Mum?" he whispered the moment he saw Petunia. "Who are they?"

"Your cousins, dear," said Petunia. "Harry and Connor Potter." She cast a thin-lipped glance at Moody. Harry had to admire her strength of mind; some of his students who'd had weeks to get used to Mulciber-as-Moody couldn't have looked at him as if he should be binned. "I don't know who these two are," she added, in a tone that implied introductions should have happened by now.

"Alastor Moody," said Harry quickly, indicating Moody. "He's an Auror, the wizarding equivalent of a—"

"I know what the Aurors are," said Petunia, eyes distant. "And this one?" She glared at Draco, who glared back.

"Draco Malfoy," Draco said. "And really, Harry should have introduced you to me, because I'm above you in ways you can't imagine."

Petunia's gaze became glacial. Harry stepped on Draco's foot and shook his head at him, then looked back at Petunia. "I'm sorry to burst in on you this way," he said. "I know it's sudden."

"You said that my family had been targeted for a ritual," said Petunia, apparently recovering herself enough to remember that. "What kind of ritual?"

Harry winced. "A blood ritual," he said.

"So he's targeting us because of my sister," Petunia finished, in a dead voice.

Harry nodded.

Petunia sat down at the table and said nothing. Harry hesitantly arranged himself across from her. Connor took the seat next to Dudley, still looking around him with friendly fascination, while Dudley peered at Connor through his fingers, shaking. Moody began pacing a beat between the kitchen window and the door, his wand already

out. Draco stood behind Harry's chair, putting a hand on his shoulder as if that was the only way he could keep from screaming at the sheer Muggle-ness of it all. Harry waited, trying to be as alert as Moody, and suspecting he was failing. His gaze kept coming back to his aunt's strained, pale face, filled with memories, all of which looked bad.

"Where is Lily?" Petunia asked abruptly. "Why didn't she come?"

Harry winced. He hadn't thought of the fact that Petunia wouldn't know what had happened to her sister, either. "Mum's in prison," he said.

Petunia spun and stared at him.

"For child abuse," said Harry, and looked away from her. The silence in the kitchen was thick with unspoken things. Harry caught a glimpse of Connor looking anxiously at him, and shook his head to tell his twin he was all right. Connor sat back in his chair, but didn't seem reassured. Draco's hands were both on Harry's shoulders now, rubbing as if they could calm him that way. Harry didn't think he would relax until this was all done. He reached out intently with his magic, seeking some sign that Voldemort was here.

"She was stolen from me, you know."

Harry looked back at Petunia. None of the Muggle lights in the kitchen were on, meaning the only illumination came from the sunset. Harry shivered, even though the light wasn't nearly as bright as the blood in his vision depicting the Guile mask on Petunia's face.

"She was stolen from all of us, but mostly me," Petunia whispered. "She was my sister before that letter came. My sister. My parents could accept it, after a while. I think she convinced them it was her destiny to go." Petunia spoke "destiny" in a high-pitched voice that told Harry exactly what she would think of prophecies and the wild Dark and the rest of it. "And she was never the same again."

She turned and looked at Harry. "You're like fairies," she said fiercely, "all of you."

Harry blinked, trying to figure out how wizards were like creatures only a few inches high and not very bright.

"You steal children," Petunia said. "Just like the old legends. You took my sister from me. She was never the same after that first year. Just talked a lot of nonsense about blood status and not fitting in, and when I tried to tell her what did it matter, because she had a family that loved her, she looked at me and said, 'That's why you can't understand, Petunia. Because you're a Muggle.' She made no sense any more. She'd spent eleven years of her life being as Muggle as I was, and now suddenly she wanted to be some kind of grand witch, respected by all. Magic was all there was to her. I didn't matter. Nothing mattered but that freakishness."

Harry could feel Draco opening his mouth. He reached up and squeezed one of his hands, hard. Draco shut his mouth with an audible smack.

"And then she came home after her third year there and started talking even more nonsense," Petunia went on. Harry wondered if she even realized she was speaking aloud. Her voice rambled, and didn't make it seem so. "About sacrifices, and how she understood what they meant now, and almost no one else did, and they were all going to save the wizarding world from Voldemort." She clenched her hands on her arms as if she were cold. "I told her I wanted my sister back. She got this pitying look in her eyes and said, 'I'm not just your little sister anymore, Petunia. Can't you see that? I'm going to save the world, and you're just going to live a little, petty life and die a little, petty death. This is better. The Headmaster says so.'"

Petunia turned around, as if she'd exhausted her reserves of bitterness. Harry didn't think so, though, and waited, still reaching for Voldemort. Sunset was drawing closer and closer.

"And now she's in prison for child abuse." Petunia laughed dully. "I wonder if she thought of that, too, when she was making sacrifices? But she couldn't have. She was stolen." She stared down at the table, and said no more.

It was just past sunset, and Harry was jumpy.

Dudley had finally decided Connor wasn't going to hurt him, and tried to make conversation. Connor replied with bright incomprehension, but Dudley kept it up, probably to soothe his own fear.

Petunia hadn't looked up from the table since she'd finished her strange little speech. Draco was currently hovering over Harry as if he would protect him against an attack from the door, and muttering phrases that Harry recognized as ones they'd used in his training in possession under his breath. Moody snarled like a grumpy hound, glaring out the window as if it was the sun's fault that he hadn't seen any action yet.

Then pain grabbed Harry by the throat so suddenly that he couldn't speak. He stiffened, and his scar burned, and a vision stole his sight again.

Voldemort was laughing, and the words overrode and twined with the vision, until Harry found he was listening more than looking.

"I couldn't stop a vision if I sent a blood-gale, Harry, but I could make up a false vision that would make you think of a blood-gale," he said, and he laughed, and his laughter tore the world apart. "Carefully manipulate it, and send you running to the wrong place. Lord Voldemort is more clever than you think.

"And now this." His voice sharpened, turned racking. Harry shook with the force of it. "Come without your wand. Come alone. If I sense either your wand or someone with you, including your Omen snake or your little Malfoy, I will destroy him at once. It's a simple enough matter, Harry. You can see where we are in my vision. You know how to get here." His voice soared exultantly again. "I swear, Harry, by blood and breath and bone, your life for his. Come to me, and yield yourself willingly, and he lives. Violate any of the conditions I have named, and he dies." He laughed again. "I wouldn't hesitate very long, Harry. Each moment you wait gives me more time to bleed him."

The vision ended. Harry sagged forward over the table, working to get breath back in his lungs, and answer Draco's shaking and shouting, and assimilate what he'd seen.

Voldemort had Snape.

Chapter Sixty-Nine: There Is Also Love In The World

Indigena Yaxley did not much like torture, and she found suffering a source of boredom. Thus, she wasn't enjoying her latest mission—on which Voldemort had told her that she was the only one permitted to accompany him—that much.

On the other hand, needs must, and a duty wouldn't be much of a duty if it didn't have an objectionable part buried in it somewhere. So she had come along, doing exactly as her Lord had told her.

When Evan Rosier had found her alone one freezing night in January and told her about the weakness of Hogwarts's wards, Indigena had disbelieved him. Rosier had fled, quite sensibly, before her Lord could find him, but Indigena had carried the news to the Dark Lord anyway, thinking he might know better than she did the truth of it.

He had laughed. How he had laughed! And then he had sent her to spy in the Forbidden Forest, guarded by her plants against animal betrayal, and bade her to send some of her vines twirling about the bones of Hogwarts, testing for a hole. If the wards were at full strength, even a plant like Indigena's, under the control of a hostile mind, should have been seen and destroyed. But all her vines came back to her alive, and with reports of the wards melting each day. They had been stabilized, but there was a weakness in the middle of them, a hole, into which they continued to run. The melting was simply slower than it had been.

Indigena jumped, a bit, as a deep groan came from behind her. She was facing the stone wall, and having one of her vines that bound wandless magic grow up it and around in circles. No matter how fast Harry entered the room, she would bind and hold him. She kept her concentration on that, and not on what her Lord was doing behind her. And if she could recite the events that had brought them here in her head as another distraction, so much the better.

The Dark Lord had changed his original plan for their February outing, which involved some Muggles who happened to be related to Harry, and chosen to target Hogwarts instead, as soon as his own spies, two of his bred snakes, brought back word of where the weakness in

the wards was located. It seemed the Dark Lord had had a good idea, and the snakes had confirmed it. So they had come to a tunnel beginning in the Forest that the snakes had shown them, Indigena had hollowed it out further with her vines, and they had walked underground and into an older tunnel, and then into Hogwarts.

They'd emerged from behind the statue of Salazar Slytherin, into the Chamber of Secrets.

Indigena looked up from her vines. She had to admit the Chamber made an impressive sight for someone, like her, who had never seen it. The Dark Lord had touched the statue of Slytherin and spoken in incomprehensible Parseltongue to it, walked about with his hand lightly brushing the walls, and had in other ways acted like a man coming home.

Then he had gone up through the Chamber—which, he'd told her in slit-eyed amusement, was guarded from the notice of both Headmistress and Founders' spirits by Slytherin's old spells—and to fetch Snape. It had all been ridiculously easy, more than Indigena would have expected it to be.

She jumped at another groan from behind her. She shouldn't be reacting like this, she thought. Severus Snape was a traitor. He had taken the Dark Mark, the kind of brand that in the old days would have signaled an unbreakable contact between Lord and companion, and yet turned against the Lord he had sworn to serve. He had said one thing, and then learned to mean another. And from the stories Indigena had heard about him, he had done it more than once, or he would not have given up Albus Dumbledore to the Ministry. A small, sniveling worm, a snake who didn't obey the Dark Lord, a damned man with no honor. Why did her stomach still twist as she listened to her Lord torturing him? It was true that she found most torture boring, but she didn't find it revolting. Setting her thorns on Evan had even been fun. At the least, it gave her information about how they reacted to human food.

She told herself sternly that revulsion was not permitted to a Death Eater—and that was what she was now, however much she might wish it otherwise. She settled her stomach, and then turned.

Voldemort had taken Snape into the center of the Chamber, a good distance from most of the plants Indigena had had overgrow the walls, all except a set of the vines that would bind Snape from using wandless magic. He had his limbs splayed out, stretched to their fullest extent, and gradually moving further apart; Indigena had told the vines to do that. Being on a rack was the least Snape should experience, really, Indigena thought, and did her best to convince her mind of that. It didn't help that Voldemort had removed Snape's robes and left him only shirt and trousers, so that she could see exactly how far his limbs were stretched.

The Dark Lord paced in a quick circle around Snape, currently, hissing to two snakes curled around his arms. They had their fangs locked into Snape's flesh, pumping in venom. Indigena didn't know what kind of snakes they were, other than ones that her Lord had bred out of his Parseltongue books. She only knew that they were what made Snape utter those groans every now and again. Her Lord had said something about the venom withering the flesh from the inside. Indigena could see why that would hurt.

Her Lord paused now, eyeing the snakes, and then abruptly hissed out a long, breathless command. The serpents released Snape and slithered off him and towards their Lord, twining around his pale arms as he stooped to receive them. They were black, with long red dashes running the length of their spines. They swayed their heads back and forth even when the rest of their bodies were coiled along the Dark Lord's arms, as if they could not miss a moment when they might dance.

Indigena saw Snape recover, somewhat, from the cessation of pain. He really was extraordinarily tough. Of course, he had survived two years at Voldemort's side during his first rise, and Indigena knew he would have suffered curses and pain from both his Lord and other, jealous Death Eaters. Now, he opened his eyes, and while a spasm crossed his face, he kept his gaze locked on the Dark Lord's and did not look away. Indigena saw no defiance in his face, unless it was a patient, stony kind.

"Now, Severus," Voldemort said in what was almost a croon, "I did so want you not to be distracted while I spoke to you." He gestured at the Chamber. "We are in the sacred place of Salazar Slytherin, the Founder of our House. Will you not look at it? Will you not enjoy?"

Snape never looked away from Voldemort. He said nothing.

"You have fallen so far from a Slytherin's true ideal," said the Dark Lord. One thing Indigena marveled at was how he could make his voice seem almost caring. Of course, he might use Occlumency to control his emotions, she supposed. "Poor Severus. Serving a Light Lord. Ignoring the call of your rightful master, who will bring back the world Salazar would have wanted." His voice altered, and Indigena learned why in the next sentence. The Dark Lord really did find it hard to control his passionate hatred of Harry. "Running about after a boy, as if he were the one who could grant you the power and prestige I know your heart so desires."

Snape continued saying nothing. Indigena supposed he was trying to avoid giving Voldemort what he wanted. So far, he hadn't even screamed.

"Do you know, Severus," the Dark Lord said, "that I considered sparing you at one time? My Potions brewer. My servant who overheard the prophecy concerning the supposed Boy-Who-Lived for me. My perfect spy." Shockingly sudden, one of his hands flicked, and a strip of skin separated itself from Snape's leg and peeled away. Snape closed his eyes and held still, muscles trembling as if he were a horse on the verge of running, while Voldemort flayed his leg with precision and care. Indigena watched the coating of skin slide from muscle and bone and delicate red-pink coils of flesh, and told herself it didn't matter, that this was the least a traitor like Snape deserved.

She could not convince herself. She was not so far gone to honor as to vomit, but she did have to look away for a moment.

When she turned back, Voldemort had begun to flay off the muscle as he'd flayed off the skin. Snape did make a sound now, not quite a scream, but an abbreviated cry, forced from him entirely against his

will. Indigena looked into his eyes, but she knew he didn't see her. His face was blank with suffering.

"I will do this," the Dark Lord said, his voice and face gone emotionless now, "as payment for your transgression, Severus. But I made a promise, and I shall keep that promise." And now he was laughing, a sound that made Indigena feel as if he were flaying off her ears. "I will leave you alive. I swore an oath. When Harry arrives, Severus, and trades his life for yours, then, I think, it will not matter to you whether you ever walk again."

Indigena saw the bolt go home. Snape must have thought, until that moment, that he was being tortured solely for betraying the Dark Lord. Voldemort had said nothing to indicate otherwise, and had seemed interested in inflicting physical pain more than emotional. Now Snape knew he was bait in a trap, and for the boy Indigena did believe he must love, as much as traitors could love anyone.

He made a valiant effort to fight. He bucked and twisted in the vines' hold, and Indigena felt them briefly begin to burn as Snape's wandless magic started to rise through his skin. But the vines had been bred to take care of that. They bore down a little harder, and the magic turned into ashes and embers

Snape slumped back again, and Indigena looked away from his face. Snape knew he was bait now, knew that Harry was coming to save him—if by "save him" one meant "lay down his life in his place."

Indigena fully expected her Lord to keep this oath, in fact. He had told her what he intended from this evening. Not just to kill Harry, not just to destroy the one who might destroy him, but to drink all of Harry's magic, make the boy an empty shell and himself powerful beyond measure. The power would be doubled or tripled if the boy came as a willing sacrifice, and his willingness would end if he did not see Snape safe before giving himself to Voldemort.

Indigena had wondered that her lord was prepared to give up vengeance on the traitor so easily, but she'd seen Snape's eyes now. This was not giving up vengeance. It was deepening it, spreading it

through Snape's flesh like the venom of the black-red snakes, to linger and cause damage even after the sacrifice was complete. The Dark Lord was destroying his right leg layer by layer; he'd reached the level of tendon and ligaments now, and was untying them like cords around a Christmas gift, laughing softly all the while. The pain was hideous.

Snape knew that laughter. He'd stood beside his Lord often enough when it sounded, as they watched some poor victim taken apart at the seams by Bellatrix Lestrange, or killed during an initiation, or, on rare occasions, tortured by Voldemort himself. He writhed under the pressure of it, his eyes closed and his throat now and then opening to release a scream.

But the physical pain and the sound of the laughter only intruded on his consciousness in jolts and flashes. He was an Occlumens, a better Occlumens than the Dark Lord was a Legilimens, and his training had run deep enough that he could retreat behind the suffering and think.

And perhaps Voldemort had known or guessed that, because now he had polluted the serenity of Snape's mind, his near-resignation to dying, with the one venom he could not purge.

Over and over, Snape saw the vision of Harry coming to the Chamber of Secrets, allowing Voldemort to bind him, allowing his magic to be drained or his blood to be taken in whatever obscene ritual the Dark Lord had planned—it was always rituals with him, always, always, as if he could make up for his own corruption by appeals to something greater—and then dying.

Because Snape had allowed himself to be taken. Because he had never expected, ever, for his vision to go dark as he paced in his quarters, worrying about Harry, and for it to come back in the Chamber of Secrets, his former Lord looming over him.

The realization pried deeper and deeper, tore open his mind and touched delicate places that Voldemort could not have assaulted with the most tireless torture. There was no safety. There never would be.

They had relied on the wards of Hogwarts, and those wards had failed. He might try to protect Harry, but he would be turned into the very victim that Harry must come to rescue. And Harry would die, because, it seemed, there was no other fate that could take him.

When Snape screamed, he felt that pain more than the other.

They had tried. They had fought, and in the end, it was not enough. They had lost.

Snape had thought himself resigned. He had believed that he thought their struggle desperate, that he respected the Dark Lord as a powerful enemy Harry might not defeat. Now he saw how foolish that had been. He had lived as if he had hope. There was none. Why should there be any?

Despair moved on him, the heaviest snake Voldemort had yet created, crushing and strangling him both at once. He could not breathe. Fire ran up the inside of his arms, but it was only an echo of the anguish slowly destroying his mind. This must be, he thought, his thoughts dim and sluggish, what it is like at the end of the world, when one can no longer deny that the world is ending.

Strange. He had always thought himself stronger than this. There was a point in his life when he would have welcomed the Dark Lord's triumph, had worked for it and hastened it on, and another when he had not wanted it but had believed he could survive it, since he could always go cold, the way his mother had taught him. He could have endured being a slave, being tortured and humiliated, seeing people he knew die. What tie did he have to the wizarding world so precious that it was more important than survival, that most Slytherin of goals?

And now the end of the world was here, and he was breaking before it.

He had to fight. He understood now the kind of suicidal courage that Harry had told him Black had exhibited, moments before his death. Black had understood that his death was the best way to destroy the fragment of Voldemort growing within him, and it was no wonder he'd smiled as he died.

If Snape destroyed himself, then at the very least Harry would have no reason to come here. The Dark Lord would have no hostage.

He began to gather his magic, folding it in under his skin. Now and then he screamed more often, to distract his Lord and get him excited. Let him think Snape's Occlumency barriers were crumbling, and he was surrendering to the physical pain. He ought to know better, since he was the one who had told Snape about his purpose as a hostage, but that was the Dark Lord for you. He never had understood the existence of love, let alone how it actually worked.

He hated and feared death. He would never think that someone else might rather die than contribute to the death and torture of someone he loved.

Snape waited until a moment when the Dark Lord had stopped to consider what torture he should begin next, and the vines had showed no sign of readjusting their grip on him, a kind of breathing pause.

Then Snape focused his own magic on his heart, bearing down, going from no pressure to all pressure in a moment, willing it to stop beating. He felt his heartbeat speed up, the instinctive fear that threatened to destroy his attempt, the crushing sensation that he had always heard signaled a heart attack. But stronger than any of those feelings, and the reason he was doing this at all, came his vicious satisfaction. He would do this, and his Lord had laid no defense against it—

Then his will drained away quite abruptly, the way the wards had run into the weak point of the Chamber. Snape found himself lying flat on his back, or as flat as he could in the hold of the vines, with his Lord kneeling above him and staring at him. His scarlet eyes conveyed a moment of genuine amusement.

"Sssseverus," Voldemort said, deliberately hissing the name. "Did you think your Occlumency barriers would hold in such a moment of focus elsewhere? Did you think I would not see what you intended to do, and that I could not stop you?"

He reached out and stroked Snape's hair, his white fingers moving as quick as beetles' legs over his face. "No," the Dark Lord said, with a hint of the tenderness and compassion that Snape remembered from his speeches about poor young pureblood wizards whose culture would be lost if Mudbloods overwhelmed their world. "No, that would never do, would it, to lose my pet when he is on the verge of fetching me the fine fat prey I want?"

He lifted a finger from Snape's face to his mouth, and smiled at what he tasted there. "There was once a potion recipe I read of that used the tears of true despair as an ingredient," he murmured. "A pity I have no use for what it creates."

Snape gave up. Physical pain and mental pain had blended into each other, and he was lost in suffering, so pure a state that keeping track of where the various sensations came from was pointless. He could feel him coming.

Oh, yes, he could feel him coming, could Lord Voldemort, his head high as he prowled around the bloodied and half-skinned mess of his former servant, and gazed at the doors to the Chamber of Secrets. The doors were closed, but that did not matter. His heir could open them. Had not his heir received the gift of Parseltongue from him? He could open the doors.

Harry.

He restrained a snarl. Lord Voldemort was too dignified to snarl. He had done what was needed, and this night, this night under a frosty February sky and in the presence of the greatest of the Hogwarts Four, he would receive back what he deserved. He had created a magical heir when he never meant to. It was only fitting that his heir's gifts would come back to him.

This was a day of no particular distinction, not Midwinter and not Midsummer and not even an old Muggle or wizarding holiday. That did not matter. When he rose again, after having consumed all of Harry's magic and licked his corpse clean, then it would become a

day of horror and loathing for all who opposed him, a day of celebration and rejoicing for those who knew the right way of things.

He could imagine, he could imagine, children being brought to the Chamber in the future and learning that this was the very site where the Dark Lord had regained his full powers. Their eyes would gape. Their mouths would open. And then they would turn and look at him, Lord Voldemort, because surely sometimes he would be here. And he would be here however long the children might come, because he was never going to die.

He paced. His serpents, of a kind not seen, not bred, for a thousand years, sang and danced on his arms. Now and then he spoke to them, and praised them. Snakes were the only creatures he had ever truly understood. They obeyed him, and were loyal. They understood power, and yielded to it. There were no suicidal charges with fangs bared. He had often thought that life would be improved if more people were like snakes, and understood his dominance instinctively.

Oh, yes, he could feel him coming. He cocked his head and laughed softly, exultantly, hunter's pride singing in his veins. Harry was at the entrance to the tunnel far above them, now. Soon he would speak to the snake with the snake carved on it and begin his descent. Oh, yes, soon. He was a hunter, a hunter who did well. Any prey could be lured in. One merely had to know what bait to set.

Lord Hunter! He had considered that as a title for himself once, before he had seen the value of using his common, ordinary, Muggle name as the basis for a name both the worlds that had betrayed him would learn to hate and fear. But he could adopt it as a secondary title when he took the Ministry. He could insist that the Minister take the title of Lord Hunter. He could insist that people speak of him as that every second time they spoke of him, should he wish.

He was dizzy with the possibilities of the future opening before him. All his study and pursuit of Dark Arts knowledge—all the years in Egypt and China and Russia and even that year in New Zealand when he had thought he would die of strain as he painstakingly learned bone magic—all the years of his first rise, and the thirteen

years of suffering he still owed Harry for, and the eight months since, all had led to this moment.

The boy was walking willingly into his trap. Had he considered, at all, that coming to his destroyer of his own free will would mean that his surrendered magic rang with power? It would be one thing if Lord Voldemort had to take his magic, tear it from him; it would still aid him, it would still give him what he needed, but it would still be a spoil of conflict, a prize of war. Surrendered, given up, then Harry's will would agree with his own, and when Harry was dead, the force of his will as well as his magic would join Lord Voldemort's.

And why not? He is my heir.

He prowled back and forth, back and forth. His heir was coming up the tunnel that led to the Chamber now. He knew where they were. Had not Lord Voldemort shown him the Chamber in the vision? The true vision, not the false one. The false one had moved Harry out of Hogwarts, where he would have sensed Lord Voldemort the moment he arrived, otherwise. The true one told the truth: that he intended to let his little Severus live, as long as Harry came alone and without his wand.

And now Harry was coming. He lifted his head and focused his senses forward, through the numerous spells he'd put on the tunnel when he went to fetch Severus. Among them were spells to sense cypress wood, to sense flesh and blood, to sense Omen snakes.

Harry came alone and without his wand.

He laughed exultantly.

Harry had not realized, as he walked the tunnel to the Chamber of Secrets, that it would be such a process of stripping away the unnecessary thoughts.

There was Draco's voice, sounding in his ears, furious, panicked, as Harry explained his vision of Snape and Voldemort in the Chamber of Secrets, Snape's limbs wound with vines that Harry had good reason

to recognize after that night at the graveyard. "You can't go, Harry! I forbid it!"

Oh, he had said other things, too, especially once they got back to Hogwarts and Harry found out that Snape was gone from his private rooms, but they were all variations on that one, central theme. Harry could not go, because Draco had forbidden it. A rescue party could be organized, but Harry could not be one of its members. Or, if he had to go to defeat Voldemort, Draco would be at his side.

Draco had not changed his tune. Harry had tried reasoned argument, had explained his plan, had told him what he thought would happen to Snape if Harry did not go, but that did not matter. In the end, it was largely because of Draco that Harry had first used *Extabesco plene* to vanish from the sight of the people around him, and then used wards to block the door to the bathroom where he would enter the Chamber of Secrets. Let them bang on that barrier all they liked. They were never going to get through it. Harry had carefully set the ward so that it would take an equal amount of magical power to his own to burst it, and only one wizard in the school had that.

"This is...most disturbing, Harry."

That was McGonagall, her face understandably pale at the thought that the Dark Lord had walked the halls of her school, and was under them right now, and she had had no clue. She had to admit that the Chamber of Secrets made an excellent candidate for the hole in the wards, though, and that none of the Founders' spirits would have been able to sense anything; they had never been able to find Slytherin's Chamber, or they could have told Headmaster Dippet the truth about Tom Riddle's first opening of it fifty years ago. And she was concerned about Snape.

Nevertheless, she, too, had told Harry not to go, though her face said she understood why he wanted to better than Draco. She had told Harry that he could not trust Voldemort to keep his word, an understatement if there ever was one.

She didn't understand, though, not really. Harry had to go because there was no other choice. Voldemort had Snape, and Harry had to go, and that was really all there was to it.

He set the memory on fire and sent it drifting in ashes behind him.

Tonks and Moody had tried to reason him out of it. Connor had looked into his face and said nothing, but his eyes spoke his fear. Remus, summoned at McGonagall's insistence, had said he would rather bite Harry than see him go to the Chamber.

Harry set all the memories on fire, and he was going to the Chamber alone, quiet, feeling the tingle of Voldemort's spells seethe over him. Argutus was not with him. Draco was not with him. Snape, especially, was not with him.

He had come, quiet, with Dumbledore's magic in the tie in his robe pocket. He didn't think Voldemort would have cast spells to detect cloth, since that would only reveal that Harry wore robes.

He had come, and he was quiet. He did wonder what he would do about the doors to the Chamber, but, as it turned out, Voldemort had opened them before he ever reached them. The bastard probably wanted him to make a dramatic entrance, Harry thought, dimly, as he stepped inside.

Three things happened at once, so quickly that he had to think about them to sort them out. Vines lashed around his arms and legs, binding his wandless magic. Voldemort Vanished his robes, leaving him naked and rendering any weapons he might have hidden in his robe pockets perfectly useless.

And Harry saw Snape, lying on his back in a nest of vines, one leg a looped, unwound, bleeding mess, his arms red as fever with magic destroying them from the inside, his head lolling on his neck, and realized that the sight hurt him more than any moment of his parents' trial had.

He let his hand hang, and watched as Voldemort strode forward to pick up the tie containing Dumbledore's magic, which had fallen to

the floor. He stared at it for a moment, then laughed. Harry bowed his head further, squeezing his eyes shut.

Don't scream. Don't scream.

"A fine feast you have brought me, Harry," Voldemort said, and under his voice Harry could hear Snape panting, small and breathless and desperate sounds. "Yourself, and this tie. You know, I trust, that a willing sacrifice of magic makes it all the more powerful?"

Harry shuddered, let himself shudder, made the vines tremble with the force of his shuddering. He had not really thought that he could simply walk into the Chamber of Secrets and use the magic stored in the tie. But he wanted Voldemort to think that. He wanted Voldemort to think him helpless, nearly conquered, so gone, so lost, to anything but the rescue of Snape that he had not thought to come in fighting, or use the magic in the tie before he entered the Chamber.

Harry knew what he had to do. He had known from the moment he confirmed the vision was real, from the moment McGonagall came back from Snape's quarters with a white face. And causing a battle that could destroy the school was not part of that plan. Nor was causing the battle only after the children had been evacuated, partly because none of the people he cared about and who cared about him would have let him go to the Chamber even then, but also because Harry wanted Hogwarts to remain standing, thank you. He was done with sacrifices, except the ones he chose. And a sacrifice of pride was a small one. Look helpless now. Lure him closer.

Don't scream. Don't scream.

"You have not answered me, Harry," said Voldemort, his voice low and sweet. "Do you know, it was through your forays into my mind that I learned the secret of the wards' weakness? I sensed you at once, my little dreamer, but I preferred to wait and see what you wanted. It seemed a small cost to reveal some of my plans when I could read your mind at my leisure."

That nearly did destroy Harry's self-control, but he clung to the plan in his mind, straight and sleek as an arrowhead. Snape had been right

about the danger of the dreams and he had been wrong, and Snape had suffered because of it, but that would have to come later. There was a place for love here, but not for apologies, and not for guilt.

Don't scream. Don't scream.

"Still no answer." Voldemort paced closer to him. "Do you think it a point of honor not to scream, then? Is it the last strength left to you, when you've yielded every other one to me—willingly?"

Harry flinched, a half-jolt that he seized up before it had gone too far, as if Voldemort had accidentally hit on his best-kept secret. He leaned further back in the vines, and closed his eyes.

Voldemort laughed softly. "Well, then, Harry, let us see how long it takes you to scream, then."

Harry had known it would be Crucio, sooner or later, but Voldemort did not speak the incantation aloud, and the sudden pain seizing him seemed to come out of nowhere. He tipped his head back, and felt his muscles shudder and judder and shake themselves apart. He didn't know if he would be able to stand when it was done.

Don't scream. Don't scream.

"Still no scream from you?" Voldemort had moved closer, from the sound of his voice. Harry did not yet know if it was close enough, and he did not dare open his eyes, just in case Voldemort used Legilimency to read the truth in them. "Well, then, perhaps this is in order."

A weight smashed into his right elbow, and filled Harry's vision with blinding yellow pain. He suspected that Voldemort had chosen the spell for its shock value. He had known agony was coming, but not from where, or how braced he should be.

Don't scream. Don't scream.

Voldemort snarled, and moved closer. Harry half-slitted his eyes, and found him standing a few feet away from him, still too far. He was

angry, from his tone; Harry shut his eyes again before Voldemort could actually meet his gaze.

"I will make you scream yet," Voldemort whispered, and then invisible fingers seized Harry's kneecap and began to pull. The pain was exquisite.

Don't scream. Don't scream.

Harry clung to the mantra, calling up every bit of training he had received to survive, and rode the pain out without screaming. Another shuffle of Voldemort's boots. Harry peered. He was close. He was very close.

"Now, this," Voldemort whispered. "Ulcerio iterum!"

And Harry felt, again, the pain of his left hand being severed. Voldemort leaned over his face, bending nearer and nearer to him.

It served.

Harry opened his mouth to scream.

And the tiny Many snake, coiled inside his mouth and thus invisible to the spells that sensed flesh and blood, lifted her head and spat her venom directly into Voldemort's eyes.

Harry saw the Dark Lord blinded, that blindness that neither Muggle nor magical cures existed for. The Dark Lord reeled back, screaming, his hands flying to his face. His pain spell on Harry's left wrist wore off.

The Many snake slithered out of Harry's mouth as Harry hissed a command at her, and straight towards Indigena Yaxley. Harry looked up, catching a glimpse of the woman's startled face, and yelled in English, "Let me go, or I set her on you!"

Indigena might have done better in a different time and a different place, a time when she hadn't just seen her Lord blinded and a place where she had chosen the battleground. She might have been startled, or she might have seen how quickly the Many snake moved,

and known that none of her vines or strangling grasses, which depended on her will to guide them, were that fast. Or perhaps she thought she had to stay alive to serve Voldemort, and that was more important than holding Harry, since there would be other chances for battle.

Whatever the reason, she believed him, and the vines holding Harry relaxed.

Harry dropped to one knee, ignored the fact that he was naked as well as he could, and then reached out and began to swallow.

He had reconciled himself to what he would have to do. As Voldemort screamed in his blindness, as Snape thrashed in his nest of vines, as Indigena did Merlin-knew-what, Harry ate magic. He reached out towards the Slytherin tie, Draco's tie, and unfolded the magic he'd contained there. It flooded towards him, a great filthy tide, and he swallowed it.

Before, he had feared that Dumbledore's magic would overwhelm him, because it was stronger than his own, and he didn't know how to cleanse its taint. Now, one fundamental thing had changed: he no longer objected to the taint. It was a weapon, and he would use it. He had become reconciled to what he had to do. As it filled him, he rose above it, his will greater than his distaste, and lashed out at Voldemort, using that swallowed magic to increase his own absorbere abilities.

Voldemort screamed as he felt his own magic being ripped away, and he might have tried to stop it. But his blinding had unseated him, distracted him fundamentally; he could not even command the snakes wound around his arms to attack Harry. Harry gulped, and gulped, and gulped, and still Voldemort could not absorb the sudden loss of his sight enough to fight him. Harry had counted on that. He ripped and tore and ripped and tore, and did not allow himself to think about what kind of damage he was doing, or what kind of filthy magic he was swallowing. This had to be done. He would do it.

No more sacrifices of lives to my morals. I'll hurt him if that's what I need to do.

Voldemort screamed, and screamed pitifully, and Harry's limbs shook as magic flooded them. He felt like a great, sloshing reservoir of polluted water, and still he drank.

"Harry! Call her off!"

That was Indigena. Harry turned his head, feeling swollen, and saw Indigena hanging from one of her own vines that had grown up the wall. The Many snake was climbing the vine tenaciously.

"Enough," Harry hissed, and she turned and slithered back to him, winding around his neck. Harry turned to look at Voldemort. He had never felt more like him than in that moment—full of Dark magic, having used Parseltongue and snake venom and absorbere magic to get this far.

Perhaps that was what made him speak the words he did next. Perhaps it was only the idea that, since he had the Dark Lord so much at his mercy, he should kill him now and save the war that might follow.

"Avada Kedavra," he whispered.

The green light took form at his fingertips. It gathered, it blazed, it fled forward. It hit Voldemort with the force of the Hogwarts Express.

It did nothing. When it faded, Voldemort was still screaming, his hands clutching at his eyes.

Harry nodded. Somehow, he was not surprised. The Dark Lord had sought to make himself immune to death. It seemed he had succeeded, at least in part. After all, he had not died from the rebounded Killing Curse the night he cursed Harry.

Or perhaps it had something to do with the prophecy. That needed an elder and a younger to kill him, and Harry didn't know which role he might play in it, but there was no thunder of prophecy in the air now.

He turned, slowly, feeling ponderous with the weight of the taint he carried, to look at Indigena Yaxley. She looked back at him, and was silent.

Harry knew he could kill her. The problem was that he no longer knew which reason he would be doing it for. He had come down determined to drain Voldemort's magic and Dumbledore's so that he would not cause the destruction of Hogwarts and he could save Snape from unnecessary death. But, so filled with Dark magic, with power that had been used to kill and hurt and scar, he felt detached from the world. He could kill Indigena, but he would never know whether he had killed her because she could be a threat in the future, or because it had seemed fun at the time. A sluggish current in his own thoughts said it would be fun.

No more sacrifices. If I will not sacrifice lives to my morals, neither will I sacrifice my morals to this war. I must know why I am killing.

He turned away, back towards Snape. This one thing he could be sure of. Rescuing his guardian was still a good thing.

Wandless magic scooped Snape up on a bed of wind. The vines slid from his limbs, and he rose, gently, his head lolling. His eyes were open, though, and sane, and fixed on Harry.

Harry met Snape's eyes in the middle of the Chamber, the only sound Voldemort's screams of pain and horror, and reality surged back into him with the force of the pounding tide, of the magic he had swallowed. He was more than the soldier who had determined he would need to wound, and he would have killed Indigena just because it sounded fun at the time, because he hadn't been himself, and getting Snape out of here was not only a good thing but his first priority.

There is also love in the world, he thought, and realized he was weeping and did not know when he had begun.

He called the bed of wind towards him and stood on unsteady feet. Crucio had left him shaky, and the spell pulling at his kneecap had hurt, but he could walk. The magic in his body saw to that. He

realized he was naked, still, but that didn't seem important. He turned towards the entrance of the Chamber.

"Harry."

Harry didn't know why he looked at Indigena Yaxley. She stood with arms around her Lord, who had at last fallen unconscious, gazing at him with a complex mixture of emotions on her face.

"You should know," she said softly, "that we had the information on the wards' weakness from Evan Rosier. Not from your dreams. My lord knew of it back in January, and only waited so long to attack because he wanted to be absolutely sure of our way into the school."

Harry blinked, once, twice. Then he said, "I don't understand why you're telling me this."

Indigena gave him a kind of fragile smile. "No," she said. "I suspect you never will." She paused, and freed one hand from Voldemort's twitching body to make a fist of it and touch it to her heart. "Thank you for my life."

Harry just stared at her. Indigena smiled once more, and then she drew her Lord towards herself and Apparated.

Harry floated Snape towards him, and saw that his guardian had fallen unconscious as well. He did not look at the ribbons of blood and flesh that covered him; he looked to make sure that he was alive, and then he turned towards the entrance into the Chamber.

It was time to go back up.

Chapter Seventy: Rapprochement

Draco hated the barrier on the entrance to the second floor loo more than he had ever hated anything in his life. It was a smooth, shimmering opaque curtain of gray light, which didn't yield for all the spells Draco had cast at it; it simply ate them, much as Harry would. A fist pounded on it made it feel as hard as stone. Draco cradled his bruised hand and glared some more. McGonagall and Lupin and the others who'd been standing here with him had gone upstairs to discuss ways of breaking it, but Draco refused to think that there wasn't some easy method to get through.

Perhaps he could create a spell in his head to dissipate the barrier? He narrowed his eyes and reached for the will that he'd used when Dumbledore threatened Harry. He kept losing it to fear of what Voldemort might do to Harry, but surely he could think, Go! And the barrier would have to go, wouldn't it?

The barrier vanished so suddenly that Draco was left stunned, and blinking, and wondering if his spell really had worked. Then he realized that Harry was standing on the other side, with a white-gold wave of light behind him, supporting Snape.

And Harry was naked.

Draco hastily whipped off his own robes—he was wearing a shirt and trousers under them, so that was all right—and slid them around Harry's shoulders. He barely seemed to notice. He was breathing so slowly that he sounded mesmerized, or asleep. Draco stepped in front of him, though, and those green eyes tracked him. They looked so exhausted that he winced.

"Harry," he whispered. "Harry, what happened?"

Harry whispered back, as if he were intent that no one hear them, "Voldemort is blind. And most of his magic is gone. I—I've got it." He grimaced. "It feels like I swallowed half a river, and the river was more shit than water."

Draco didn't know how to react to any of that, so he said, "I think we should get Professor Snape to Madam Pomfrey."

"Yes," said Harry. "Yes, of course." He gave a faint frown, and then turned towards the stairs to the hospital wing. Draco walked beside him, now and then glancing back at Snape. The gleam of bone came through the torn mess of his right leg. Draco looked away again. It wasn't that he had a squirmy stomach, he told himself, just that—well, he couldn't perform healing magic as well as Harry, and right now he'd rather make sure that Harry stayed upright on the way to someone who could help.

And he wanted to think about Harry.

He was absurdly glad, now, that McGonagall and Lupin and the rest hadn't been with him when Harry came through the barrier, even though at the time he had hated them for giving up too easily. He wouldn't have wanted to share the sight of Harry without his robes with anyone.

Perhaps his guilty enjoyment of the sight meant he was a bad person. Draco preferred to think of it as a gift from some kind fate that had noticed his patience and his worth and given him that brief glimpse as a reward.

Of course, to a certain extent that would increase his impatience—now that he knew what Harry looked like naked, he was more interested than ever in sharing a bed—but fates were like that, he thought complacently, fond of contradictions.

He had thought he would spend the first minutes after Harry came through the barrier yelling at him for going alone and using that ridiculous Vanishing spell again, but the look in Harry's eyes and the sight of Snape mutilated argued against the wisdom of that. And the sight of Harry naked did help to make up for a lot.

Draco was aware that his thoughts were not the most virtuous in the world. He didn't care. As he helped Harry up a step when he stumbled, and admired the Many snake gleaming like a torque

around his throat just above the deep green robes, he didn't care at all.

Harry entered the hospital wing feeling as if he floated beneath a scrim of dirt. Everywhere he looked, objects were gray for a moment, and then color bled into them. For that first moment, Harry thought he wouldn't want to live in the world his sight portrayed.

He knew it came from the filthy magic he'd swallowed, and as soon as he managed to shed that and tuck it into an object somewhere, then he'd be free of this feeling. But he couldn't help it right now, and so he watched Madam Pomfrey utter a sharp gasp and float Snape at once into a bed from behind that thick glaze of dirt. It scummed over his emotions, too, and stretched them out, and some of them never seemed to arrive at all.

That left him, oddly, more open to intellectual truths. He looked at Snape's still face, and his red-glowing arms, and the mass of looped flesh and tendon and skin that Madam Pomfrey, with tears in her eyes, was beginning to wind back into its proper place, and knew he had caused it, at least in part.

Oh, Voldemort would still have come hunting. If Yaxley told the truth and Rosier had been the one to tell them about the wards, then he could have hurt Snape even without Harry's dreams. But that open link had allowed Voldemort to send him the false vision of the Dursleys in trouble. If Harry had kept the Occlumency barriers up, he would have remained in the school, and sensed Voldemort the moment he came out of the Chamber of Secrets—or even before that. Since he could enter the Chamber, and knew its location, Harry wasn't entirely sure that Slytherin's spells were proof against him.

The guilt hovered a long way behind the realizations, thanks to the magic. Harry blinked. He saw Madam Pomfrey turn to him with tears on her face, and ask him to fetch a Blood-Replenishing Potion from the cabinet on the wall. Harry walked over to it mechanically, only then feeling the swish of cloth around his ankles. He looked down in confusion. Oh. He was wearing robes. He had wondered if Draco tucking them around his shoulders was a vision, or a concoction of

his mind. He didn't remember the walk to the hospital wing, come to that.

He glanced over his shoulder, though, and saw Draco leaning on one of the beds, staring at him anxiously. Harry relaxed a little. He wasn't alone here, especially if Madam Pomfrey had to say that Snape would never walk again.

Yes, the guilt hovered a long way behind the realizations. He handed the Blood-Replenishing Potion to Madam Pomfrey and watched her force it down Snape's throat. Snape swallowed with some difficulty. Harry listened intently, trying to hear if his breathing had eased, and then pulled himself up short. He wouldn't be able to hear that yet, if anytime soon.

He had caused this, in part. But more important than the blame and the guilt was the acceptance of that fact, in all its sharp-edged dimensions. Harry let out a long breath, and asked, "Madam Pomfrey?"

"What is it, Harry?" The matron never looked away from Snape, tracing white lines in the air with her wand. The pieces of his leg followed the lines, dancing like snakes charmed to a flute.

"Can you save his leg?"

"I think so." Madam Pomfrey extended a hand towards him, still not releasing her concentration on his injury. "But it would help if I had more magic. Can you pass power to me the way that you once drank the old Headmaster's?"

Harry blinked a bit, then said, "Yes," and reached out, clasping her hand. He closed his eyes, thinking of the way he had passed magic to Elfrida Bulstrode, so that she could continue to be a witch after pouring all of her magic into her daughter.

The trickle of clean power crept past the taint and into Madam Pomfrey's fingers. Harry felt her jump, heard her gasp. He wondered if it came from the suddenness of the gift, or the growth of her magic. She would never have experienced that after a certain point in her

childhood that she was probably too young to remember, he thought with giddy affection. He closed his eyes and poured a little more, carefully straining out the impurities that might come from Dumbledore's or Voldemort's magic.

"That's enough, Harry, I think," said Madam Pomfrey, her voice unsteady.

Harry opened his eyes, and had to blink against the sheer shine of the white lines that sped above Snape's body now. He listened, and could hear them singing as they put Snape's leg back together. He stepped back. Madam Pomfrey could attend to Snape's leg. Harry was going to watch his face, and absorb this particular sharp edge of what had happened.

Snape might walk again, but if so, it would take a long time for him to heal. Or he might walk with a limp, or his right leg might be next to useless. And Voldemort had had him for a relatively short time.

Harry touched his right arm, and frowned. The fever-colored magic still danced beneath the surface, and he wasn't sure that Madam Pomfrey, in her rush to attend to Snape's leg, had even noticed it. For that matter, he wasn't sure that anyone but him could see it.

"Madam Pomfrey?" he whispered.

"What is it, Harry?" The matron's voice was hard, but she spoke in the way that someone did who was utterly concentrated on a task and easily passing through it. She could spare a bit of focus for the outside world.

"Will it disturb you if I drain out the venom from his arms?" Harry thought it must be venom. He remembered the red-black snakes coiled on Voldemort's arms with a shudder of revulsion. Then he blinked. It seemed his emotions had caught up with him at last.

"Of course not," said Madam Pomfrey, her voice abstracted. "It would be a help."

Harry nodded, and then turned to Draco. "Draco, will you fetch me an empty vial?"

Draco ran and got it without questions. Harry didn't know if that came from his understanding that questions would hold things up right now, or his anxiety to be of use. Harry positioned the vial just under his own left arm, then reached out and began to eat the fever-colored magic from Snape's arms.

It burned as it passed into him, and it also tasted foul. This was like drinking boiled shit. Harry grimaced in resignation, and concentrated the venom into his own arm as fast as he could, then forced it to the surface of his skin. He had to close his eyes as a bloody blister erupted above the vial, burst, then began to drain into it.

"Harry?"

Harry opened his eyes and met Draco's concerned ones. He smiled. "I'll be all right in time, Draco," he said quietly, though he could feel the venom ravaging the flesh inside his arms and knew he would probably have to stay in the hospital wing himself when this was done. "But Snape's had this time in him for longer, and Merlin knows what it'll do if it stays there."

He dropped his head and took several harsh breaths as the magic continued to pour through him. Draco took control of the vial, moving it along Harry's arms to receive the fluids from the several blisters that appeared. Harry studied his face, and saw disgust there, but determination to remain until things were done.

He looked around the hospital wing, searching for another empty vial to Accio to himself, and caught a brief glimpse of the Headmistress standing in the doors. She had one hand to her mouth, and Harry didn't know if it was to conceal an expression of horror or hold back her dinner. She met Harry's eyes, and he nodded, once. McGonagall nodded back, then withdrew. She would tell the others that he had returned safely, Harry knew, and that Snape was still alive—neither he nor Madam Pomfrey would be working that intensely if Snape were dead—and that they couldn't be disturbed right now.

“You’re dripping on the floor, Harry.”

Draco’s voice recalled him to himself. Harry shook his head and used a non-verbal spell to swing open the doors of Madam Pomfrey’s Potions cabinet. That way, he could see the empty vials, and call another one.

So it went, until Harry had filled four and a half vials with the mixture of blood and venom and tainted magic, and no matter how he looked, he could see no trace of the feverish glow left in Snape’s arms. He sat down in a chair that someone—Madam Pomfrey? Draco?—had brought to him, beside the bed, and stared at Snape. His face was still slack with unconsciousness. Harry didn’t know if any of the lines of pain had eased. He hoped they had.

He turned his gaze to Snape’s right leg. Madam Pomfrey had done an extremely careful job of reassembly, aided by the magic he’d given her, but she’d warned Harry that she wouldn’t know all the consequences until tomorrow afternoon. The leg still seethed with the “heat” of the spells she’d used. When that cooled away, then she could see how much permanent damage had ensued, and whether Snape would have a long recovery, a short recovery, or none at all.

Harry nodded. So he couldn’t quite absorb all the dimensions of what he had done or not done, yet. He wouldn’t know that until tomorrow afternoon.

Was there anything else that he could do right now?

Yes, one thing.

Harry closed his eyes and began, carefully, to rebuild the Occlumency barrier between his mind and Voldemort’s. If he probed, he could sense great pain on the other side of the link, waiting to swallow him. He smirked, which stretched his face oddly, and then blinked. He hadn’t known he would enjoy his enemy’s pain this much.

But he did. Voldemort was blind, and drained of a good part of his magic, and mingled with the rage and pain came a great deal of fear, like sluggish, chill water. Voldemort had not really feared him before,

Harry thought, crouching on the edge of their connection like a werewolf in high grass. Now he did, and as he struggled to heal, he would know that his enemy might come down on him at any moment, and take advantage of his weakness. It was what Voldemort would do, and Voldemort judged all other minds by his own.

Harry withdrew behind the high grass, and thickened the barrier again. He didn't think swooping off after Voldemort would be a help right now, particularly when he had no idea of the Dark Lord's physical location without opening the scar connection wide. He would prefer to set a trap that took advantage of his surroundings, the way Voldemort had tried to take advantage of the Chamber as home ground for Slytherin's heir. And he knew when he wanted to set the trap. If cosmic events and world-shaking storms were going to happen anyway, one might as well use them.

"Harry?"

Harry opened his eyes, and blinked, and saw Draco standing beside him, with a vial of sweet-smelling potion in his hand. Harry lifted his eyebrows. He knew only one potion that smelled that sweet. It would put him into a healing sleep. Presumably, Madam Pomfrey had decided it would heal the damage the venom had done within his arms as well as relax him, but there was no saying how long that would take. And Harry wanted to remain awake until he was sure he understood everything he had done.

"Harry," said Draco, pushing the vial at him.

Harry bit his lip thoughtfully. Perhaps Madam Pomfrey was right. He might miss some of the considerations he needed to make in this state. Certainly, seeing the world from behind a scrim of dirt wasn't normal, and nor was the almost emotionless determination with which he made decisions right now. Perhaps he would do better when he had rested.

He accepted the vial and swallowed it quickly. Then he stood and made his way over to another bed, not far from Snape's.

He actually didn't know if he made it there before he fell asleep. If he didn't, though, he trusted Draco to catch him before he hit the floor. Snape opened his eyes slowly. He remembered everything, of course he did, but the fact that this was not the Chamber of Secrets still overwhelmed him for a moment. He had given in to despair so thoroughly before Harry arrived that his mind could have made up the delusion of a rescue for him.

But no. He was in the Hogwarts hospital wing, and if a twinge from his right leg warned him not to move it and his arms ached as though someone had beaten them with a Flagellum curse, at least he was alive, and the Dark Lord did not stand beside him.

A light snore attracted his attention. Snape turned his head and saw Harry curled up in the next bed over, sleeping. Draco was in the bed beyond that, but he didn't look hurt, though Snape scrutinized him closely for a moment before turning to stare at Harry.

Harry had come in with one of the Many snakes in his mouth—presumably the same one coiled around his neck now and watching Snape with glittering eyes—and proceeded to save Snape's life.

It had been risky, of course it had, but they had all been at enormous risk from the moment Voldemort had stepped inside Hogwarts's wards. And, Snape had to admit, it had been a calculated risk. He had heard Voldemort elaborating on Harry's refusal to scream; every minute of that torture blazed in his mind like letters of fire. He had thought it strange, since he knew Lily had trained Harry to scream during pain, overriding it and giving his enemies what they wanted while maintaining more of a chance to save his own sanity and break free later. So he had looked over, and seen Harry open his mouth to scream at last, and instead of overwhelmed pride, a snake's venom had erupted.

And the Dark Lord was blind.

Snape laid his head back on the pillow and stared at the ceiling, and thought about the implications of that.

No one that he knew of had dealt the Dark Lord such a blow during the First War. Dumbledore had stopped him from taking over wizarding villages several times, and sometimes he took a punishing loss in the form of Aurors or Order of the Phoenix members ambushing his Death Eaters, but he had more magic, and he had more Death Eaters, and he had inventive, cruel magical geniuses like Adalrico Bulstrode. He had always risen, always grown mightier—slowly, true, but steadily. His fall had been only temporary, and when he returned on the night that Harry was taken to the graveyard for the first time, Snape had assumed the Dark Lord would move forward again, gaining ground until a final battle.

Reversals such as this were not supposed to happen, not to the mightiest Dark Lord in ten generations.

Snape looked at Harry again. Harry breathed normally, as if he had never done anything remarkable. Of course, the illusion of innocence was disrupted, if one knew how to look, by the snake around his neck and the way his left sleeve lost substance abruptly around the wrist.

Harry had saved his life.

Snape closed his eyes and shook his head. He was still angry with himself for letting the Dark Lord take him so easily, but other than that, he felt none of the emotions he would have expected to feel. The idea that he ought to be angry at Harry for taking such a risk was there, of course, but it met the memory of the Chamber and stopped dead.

Something had happened there, a crossroads that afforded him a choice of paths forward. He could take the one he had walked before, accusing Harry of risking his life needlessly. He knew that Harry would accept the blame from him because of the injuries he'd sustained. He might never cease silently resenting Snape's attitude, but he would not oppose it when he had only to glance at the remains of Snape's right leg and feel guilt.

But that wasn't enough, because Snape did not feel that way anymore. It would be the easier road, because of the changes that the others implied—a path laid over a broad and flat course that Snape had walked many times in the past, rather than the treks over

mountains and dales that the others promised. But ease was not enough. Choosing a path because it was easy seemed almost insulting, after what both he and Harry had endured.

He could admit that he'd been wrong, about everything, and see the dawning of forgiveness in Harry's eyes. But that wasn't enough, either. If Harry ever found out that Snape had spoken of his guilt merely to earn that forgiveness, he would be disappointed—perhaps blame himself. Or he would blame Snape, and so far as Snape was concerned, there had been more than enough of that.

So that left another path. Snape scowled at nothing; other than himself and the two sleeping boys, there was no one in the hospital wing. Snape wished there had been, so he could snap at their well-meaning concern instead of being alone with his thoughts.

This path would involve changing himself. He didn't want to. He knew what he was—former Death Eater, repentant spy, horrible teacher, someone who cast blame and aspersions on others. The potion he had brewed that had let him look at his soul when he was seventeen had shown him all the ugliness of what he was. And Snape had accepted that ugliness. Why shouldn't he? When someone else clashed with him, he had the satisfaction of knowing that, yes, he was not a good man, that he was a bastard, and that it was a comfortable niche to be in. If he knew himself, he never needed to delve deeper.

And then this.

"If the Dark Lord has never suffered such a reversal before," Snape whispered to Harry, who went on healing and sleeping and didn't hear him, "then neither have I."

So much of what he'd believed about the world had turned out to be true. Given Dumbledore's methods, there was little difference between Dark and Light. James Potter had been even more of a coward and a bully than Snape had credited him with, and he had lived to see his rival fallen and humiliated. Black had been a fool. Lupin was, perhaps, not so bad, but he'd certainly never made an overture to friendship, either. Regulus had returned, and proved just

as much of a hero, just as much of a shining guide star, as Snape had suspected he was when Regulus's example inspired him to turn against Voldemort. He's readjusted his mind a bit around Harry, but Harry's recklessness had seemed to prove that Snape was right to play the role of clutching guardian.

And now he would have to change. He'd have to treat Harry more as a comrade-in-arms than a child. At the same time, he'd been right about the danger of Harry opening the Occlumency link, and he would have to emphasize that. And that didn't begin to cover the fact that he had no idea how to apologize, not really, and his humiliation at being such an easy capture, and the fact that he'd loved Harry enough to take his own life.

All of this was very confusing, and Snape did not like confusing things.

But his three most powerful emotions—rage and pride and love, say it—would not allow him to walk any different path. It would have to be this one.

Snape scowled at the ceiling and lay down again, to contemplate wrenching his life and self out of line, how impossible it would be to do that, and how impossible it would be to do anything else, and how in the world he was to keep the balance between what he needed and what Harry did.

Harry patiently held out his right arm as Madam Pomfrey finished running her wand down his left one. She checked the right one, then glanced up with a nod and a look of pleasure. "The venom did nothing more than chew some of the flesh inside your arms, Harry," she murmured. "There will be some pain, but you bled it out fast enough that the damage should heal quickly."

"And Professor Snape?" Harry asked, casting a glance at the far bed. Snape was asleep, still, though it was almost noon on the day after the rescue. His chest rose and fell with such deep, even breaths that Harry envied him. He'd slept the same way under the potion, but he really couldn't remember it. At least the scum of dirt was gone from his vision. The tainted magic had flowed back from the surface and settled into the depths of his own power. That worried Harry a bit—he

needed to drain it into an object that couldn't be broken or shredded easily, and he needed to do it before it mingled so completely with his own magic that he couldn't tell the difference any more—but at least he could think and feel normally again.

"His leg still needs to cool, Harry," said the matron, and stepped away from his bed. "I believe his arms should recover, though they'll be weak and have tremors for a few months. Now, I'll have a house elf bring you lunch—"

"No need."

Harry turned towards the door, and blinked in surprise. There couldn't have been many students who had seen the Headmistress carrying a tray of tea, bowls of soup, and what looked like scones. Madam Pomfrey herself blinked as though she suspected she were seeing things, then shook her head.

"If you wish, Headmistress," she said dubiously.

"I do," said McGonagall firmly, and put the tray down on Harry's bed.

Harry studied the tray, and was grateful that McGonagall had thought to bring two cups of tea and two bowls of soup. Draco had gone to the loo, but he would return in a moment, and he would want to eat. McGonagall sat down in the chair Draco had been using so far, and waited both until Harry had had a sip from his cup and Draco had emerged, sitting down in another chair.

"I wished to discuss the wards with you, Harry," said McGonagall.

Harry nodded and sipped at his soup. "The wards were draining into the Chamber of Secrets, Headmistress," he said. "Slytherin worked some magic into the stone that kept the other Founders from discovering it, I think. But I'm not sure if they can enter it even now. You know where the entrance is, and I left the sink open behind me—at least, I should have—"

"You did," said McGonagall. "I've found it advisable to put up a barrier on the loo, however. It seems that many of my students, the first-year

Gryffindors in particular, think an adventure in the Chamber of Secrets would be fun.” She pinched her lips tight and shook her head.

Harry blinked, wondering how in the world they could want to be somewhere Voldemort had walked, and then remembered that they’d had no direct experience of the Dark Lord. “And so I know that you can enter,” he finished. “But I don’t know if the Founders can go with you.”

“I was thinking more of your entering the Chamber, Harry, and doing what you can to stabilize the wards,” said McGonagall. “What would happen if you sealed the stone, do you think? Closed every entrance for a ward?”

Harry paused in lifting a spoonful of soup to his mouth, at least until Draco glared at him and his right arm began to shake from the effort of holding it up. Harry swallowed the food and said carefully, “I don’t know if that would work, Headmistress. I didn’t sense the magic of the wards themselves when I went to the Chamber. It’s more as if that’s the central weak point, and the magic flows down towards it and passes through and around it.”

“If we destroyed the Chamber?”

Harry winced. He hadn’t recognized the spells woven into the stone, even after a few weeks of studying the Dark Arts books Regulus had gifted him with. “I don’t think that would work either, Headmistress. Knowing Slytherin, he used spells that would bring down the school itself if his Chamber was hurt.”

McGonagall nodded. “Then what would you recommend?”

“The construction of new wards altogether,” said Harry, and smiled despite himself as she winced. “I know, it’ll take time, and it can’t be a time when any students are in the school and need you for other duties. But I believe it has to be done. The wards that were connected to Dumbledore will be tattered and go on draining. You’ll have to create an entirely new set of them that are tied to you and won’t fall into the Chamber because you don’t want them to. Easter holidays, perhaps?”

“And until then?” McGonagall asked.

“I’ll talk to Scrimgeour, and ask him about having Aurors to guard the school, the way we did last year. And I can create a ward protecting the outside of the school,” said Harry, “and the more vulnerable areas, like the common rooms. I think sealing the entrance to the Chamber, and any of the other tunnels the Founders know about, should be done, as well.” He started to push the tray on his knees away. “I should do that now, in fact, before—”

“Relax, Harry,” said McGonagall firmly. “It’s daytime, and the wards are stable for now.”

“And you haven’t finished your lunch,” Draco added, sitting back and sipping at his own soup as if he wanted to provide a good example.

Harry scowled at him. Draco raised his eyebrows, in a gesture that made Harry feel ultimately childish. Harry sighed and turned back to his soup.

“I have been in contact with the Minister once already today,” said McGonagall, “as he wanted to know the details of what had happened in the Chamber. I told him that I didn’t know yet.” She fastened her eyes on Harry and waited.

Harry let out a sharp breath, and began to tell the story as emotionlessly as he could. It helped that he’d related his plan to McGonagall and Draco before he entered the Chamber, and they knew why he’d used the Slytherin tie embedded with Dumbledore’s magic—to make Voldemort think both that he’d come armed and that he didn’t have any other weapons—and the Many snake. When he spoke about the spell slamming into his elbow, Draco snatched up his arm. Harry winced, but allowed it.

“You didn’t tell me about that yesterday,” Draco said.

“Because it left a bruise,” said Harry. “And bruises are just a little irrelevant compared to what else went on down there.”

“Harry, they—“

“They are, Draco.” Harry was surprised by how vehement his voice was. It was a voice for making speeches with, not replying to his boyfriend’s concern with, but he’d started and he couldn’t stop now. “I realized quite a lot of things down in the Chamber, including how I need to fight this war. Without mercy to Voldemort, yes, but it’s not going to be as simple as dueling him. I cast the Killing Curse, and it accomplished nothing at all. And I only managed with the Many snake because he hadn’t thought I was cunning. Now, he knows I am, and he’ll be more cautious next time. I’ll have to fight him in a different way.

“I plan to lure him to Hogwarts on Midsummer Day—“

“What?” Draco said that, rising from his chair and staring at Harry. McGonagall remained seated, but the look of shock on her face could not be greater if Harry had slapped her. “Why?”

“Because a storm is going to happen then,” said Harry quietly, “the twin of the storm that the wild Dark woke. A storm of Light. A prophecy that Professor Lestrangle recited to me says so. And it’s going to fall here. I plan to draw on the strength of that storm. I have allies who can use it, even if I can’t.” He glanced at McGonagall, who nodded slowly, her eyes alight with wonder. “Choose the time, choose the place, and lure him in.”

“He’d never just launch an attack on Hogwarts on Midsummer Day,” said Draco skeptically. “Why?”

“Because he’s obsessed with symbols.” Harry shrugged. “There are other rituals he could have conducted to resurrect himself, but he chose to come back on Midsummer Day, and go through the bother of tricking the Light into giving him the power to bind me. And it was a limited power, at that, ending at the moment of true sunset—but that mattered to him, that symbolism of Dark overcoming the Light. He chose to stage this latest confrontation with me in the Chamber of Secrets, partly so he could choose the battleground, I’m sure, but also because that’s the home ground of Slytherin’s heir. He tortured me; he didn’t use the Chamber’s spells against me. I believe it was

the symbolism that was important to him. He'd even opened the doors for me when I arrived, to insure that I'd have to enter the monster's lair with my eyes open. A good thing, too, since I was wondering how I was going to hiss the command without opening my mouth and letting him sense my snake." Harry touched the Many snake's smooth scales.

"He was interested in the prophecy, too," Harry added. "But he never knew the full thing. What if I created one? What if I hinted, pretended, that part of that prophecy says he'll face me at Hogwarts, on Midsummer's Day of this year, and that he'll stand or fall when he does so?"

"All of this depends on his dancing to your tune, you realize," said Draco, doubtfully.

"I believe it can be done," McGonagall said; her eyes were still alight. "Albus—that is to say, Dumbledore tricked him several times that way during the First War. He never seemed to connect our use of his weakness for symbols to our attacks. He merely believed that of course we would choose to face him on the first day of spring, or on Halloween, because those were important days."

"He even attacked Connor and me on Halloween," Harry told Draco, "months after we were born, and sent the Lestranges after Neville's parents on the same evening. Why? Because it's the night of the dead come back, one of only two nights that necromancers can speak. It's symbolic." He spat the word, but he felt a grim satisfaction. It would take work, but they had nearly four months until Midsummer. He would make Voldemort dance to his tune yet.

Some of the icy disbelief in Draco's eyes melted, and he nodded. "I think you can do this, after all," he murmured, smiling at Harry.

"So nice to have your faith in me," Harry said.

Draco sniffed. "I make fewer mistakes than you do, Harry. I think it only right that I should have more faith in myself, first. You get gifted with it when you prove you can do something right." But his hand

found Harry's and gripped it. Harry grinned at him, feeling fierce determination rise up in himself.

If I know my enemy, and he doesn't know me, then I can take him. Snape stared at the ceiling of the hospital wing, while he kept his breaths moving in the mimicry of deep, peaceful sleep, and damned himself for a fool, again.

He had assumed that he would have to do the majority of the changing in his relationship with Harry. What had happened to him in the Chamber had carved so deep and profound a change into him already that he had forgotten much the same thing might have happened to Harry himself. The fact that he had come in with a plan and managed to win had, Snape supposed, signaled to him that he was wrong about Harry's tendency to go dashing into dangerous situations without a thought in his head, but he had assumed that it would not last. He had certainly never expected to drift lazily back to consciousness and hear Harry calmly listing the reasons why he had some chance of luring the Dark Lord to him.

And that was a contradiction in terms. If Harry could create a plan when he had only a few hours to do so and someone he loved was in danger, why couldn't he create a plan when he had months and the chance to think more rationally? And if Harry was incapable of creating plans at all, then he would have come into the Chamber as a sacrifice only, the way both Voldemort and Snape had at first assumed he had.

So Harry had changed, or could—his methods, at least. Snape supposed he would have to look at the last few months in light of this new information, again, and see what he had missed and what was new and what methods Harry had formed in response to his anger.

He must have huffed once too deeply, because abruptly McGonagall was bending over him, saying softly, "Severus?"

Snape nodded at her. It was too late to pretend he really had been asleep, and certainly he couldn't ask the Headmistress not to reveal that fact to Harry.

McGonagall did something he hadn't expected, though. She stepped back, her face stern, and called, "Mr. Malfoy, come with me, please. I would like you with me when I speak to the Minister. You can give him another perspective on the events of yesterday."

"But I—"

McGonagall had turned away from Snape, so he couldn't see which expression she wore, but whatever it was, it made Draco swallow audibly. A moment later, he walked past Snape's bed, pausing to give him an expression that was a mixture of a smile and helpless relief.

"I'm glad that you're alive, sir," he said.

Snape only nodded, since he thought he would need all his words for the coming—conversation? confrontation?—with Harry. Draco turned away a moment later and hurried after McGonagall, who firmly shut the doors of the hospital wing behind her, and might have spoken a locking spell, too. Barring the entrance of Pomfrey, Snape supposed, he and Harry had a chance for uninterrupted conversation.

He started to turn over, slowly, but Harry had already kicked his own blankets off, with an impatience that showed how little he thought he needed them, and pulled up one of the chairs grouped around his bed next to Snape's.

Snape stared at his ward in silence for a moment. Harry's face was lined, but Snape thought that not all of that came from last night; he'd been stressed before it, after all, with his attempts to gather his allies for the spring equinox meeting and knock down misconceptions about it, and the very polite argument he'd been having with Scrimgeour over werewolves' rights. The real change was in the eyes. Snape had not seen Harry look at him in months the way he was looking right now, as if he were the crisis Harry needed to conquer, the person he needed to heal or protect.

But guilt was not the only emotion there; Snape would have felt ready to strike out if it had been, because he had survived, and he must have a good chance of keeping the leg, or Harry would have told him

at once. Instead, Harry spoke concern in the way he reached out and grasped Snape's hand with his own, and resignation in the twist of his mouth, and determination in that he never looked away, even when he began to speak words that he must have thought condemned him.

"You were right about the visions. It was a false one that lured me out of the school, because I thought my Muggle aunt and cousin were in danger." He took a deep breath, and gestured towards his scar without releasing Snape's hand. "I should have known it, from the way this burned. That's always been a sign of Voldemort's presence. He got me out of the school just so that he could go after you. I'm sorry."

Snape forced his voice to work. "What happened as a result of this was dangerous," he agreed. "The Dark Lord is an incredibly accomplished Legilimens. It may still be possible for you to use the link as a weapon against him, but it would need to be very carefully controlled and regulated."

Harry blinked at him warily. Snape realized he must have braced himself for another scolding, the way he had received after Rosier had taken him to Durmstrang.

Perhaps it is best that I tell him now. He shall never face that again.

"Harry. Listen to me."

Harry nodded. He shifted in the chair, but it was only to get more comfortable; his eyes and his hand remained steady.

"You are not a child in the sense that I thought you were," Snape said. Merlin, this was hard. He wanted to be both honest and qualified, so that Harry could see what this truly was: an offer of reconciliation, not a surrender. He would not, he could not, become only what Harry needed him to be. Even if he'd had the ability, Harry would have hated that, to think he was forcing someone else into a different mold. "You can plan, and I accept now that you made a calculated sacrifice when you went to Durmstrang. You did the same thing last night." He tried a smile, and if it came out as a half-sneer, even that minor effort made Harry sit up as straight as if he'd been stung, so it was worth it.

“I should know the signs of it. I took the same kind of gamble when I served as a spy among the Death Eaters. Sometimes a risk, a sacrifice, is the only way we can win anything at all. When we fight the Dark Lord, that is even more true than it is at other times.”

Harry responded, his voice soft and full of such mingled emotions that Snape couldn't tell what they were yet, only that he was glad for their existence. “I—you were right in some things, sir. Not all. I have changed enough. I know that I need plans to fight Voldemort, let alone to gently tell wizards and witches what idiots they're being about magical creatures, and Muggleborns, and Squibs, and Muggles, and everyone else they might treat like scum on the soles of their boots.” He squirmed, as if he didn't like what he had to say next. “But I didn't discuss my plans with you. So I suppose from the outside they might have looked fragmented, as if I didn't know what I was doing.”

“They often did look that way,” Snape had to admit. “With the meeting that you held last weekend, I believe that you lost control because you did not realize that Gloriana Griffinsnest hates werewolves, for example.”

“She hates werewolves?”

Snape nodded, hiding his amusement. Harry's face had twisted in dismay that indicated he hadn't learned that since the meeting, either.

“No wonder Claudia Griffinsnest finds it so hard to tell her family that Fenrir Greyback bit her,” Harry muttered, and then looked up at Snape, making a visible attempt to shake the perils of his allies away. “That's the kind of thing that you can help me with then, sir,” he said quietly. “And if I tell you what my plans are, they'll make sense to you, and ease your worry about me.”

“I would not blame you if you didn't trust me, after my efforts to dig myself out of your good opinion in the last month,” said Snape.

Harry cocked his head. “It's more complicated than that,” he began.

“Is not everything, with you?” Snape would have restrained the comment if he could, but when Harry grinned at him, he realized that

the humor had probably reassured Harry more than a dozen words might have that he was coming back to normal.

“Yes,” Harry cheerfully agreed. “So this should be, too.” He bit his lip, and his smile faded. “I trust you, but only to do certain things. When I can predict you, sir, then I’m confident. I thought I could trust you to react to my every possible risky plan with anger, so I didn’t tell you about them. That included the dreams and the meeting and the vision about the Dursleys. And when you got angry at me after the meeting, I only had that reinforced.” He gritted his teeth and drove forward through the next words. “It contrasted with the way that you helped heal me after Midwinter, but I think I convinced myself that that was a mistake, that you didn’t care, or that you could only do that because I’d been hurt so badly. If I escaped unscathed, the way I did from Durmstrang, then you’d yell at me.”

Snape nodded slowly, and restrained several of those things he wanted to say before he spoke. No one else was here, he reminded himself. That meant that he could speak words that would make him look weak in front of an audience, even if that audience had consisted only of Draco.

“Some of that is true and some of it is not true, Harry,” he said carefully. “I conceded you had no choice but to face the wild Dark; it was you or no one. And much the same thing was true of the battle at the beach. I grew angry when I believed you had made a sacrifice, when you leaped in front of your brother to take a curse or when you, as I believed, put yourself in mortal danger from Rosier to save others.”

“But he never tried to kill me,” Harry said.

Snape shook his head. “He is wild, Harry. Wild in the sense that the Dark is, or a dragon is. He cares for nothing but his own purposes, his own entertainment. Perhaps you were safe with him because he chose to honor the life debt, but at any moment he could have turned and struck at you, if he decided that was the more amusing thing. You know now that the collar he used to compel your cooperation was false. Think of everything he does as false, as changing all the

time. If it had been anyone else but Rosier you went with, then I would not have been so angry.”

“And again, I didn’t know that,” said Harry, his tone noticeably cooler now. “Because you hadn’t told me about the collars, and you’ve never warned me in detail about Rosier before.”

“About the collars, I did not,” said Snape, and restrained both his impulse to lash out and his impulse to apologize for everything. This was the discussion that they had needed to have since January. He would not pretend he was sorry when he was not, and he would not show anger that would drive Harry away. “For that, I am sorry. But about Rosier, I have. I have told you again and again that he is dangerous, Harry, that we could not trust the hints that he pretended to give about the Dark Lord’s plan last year.”

“One of those hints was true,” Harry argued. “I should have been wary of the sun.”

“But he did not tell you what it meant, and he helped Voldemort restrain and torture you,” Snape said, keeping his voice to the calm, neutral tone he had sometimes used, to good effect, when arguing with Bellatrix Lestrange, in the days before she was mad. “I think you still have an amount of trust in him, Harry. You took the gamble of going with him because you believed there was a good chance that you would come back from Durmstrang alive. But there was not. There was no chance at all, no way of calculating the possibilities. Where Rosier is involved, there never is. He sends all predications into chaos.”

Harry lowered his eyes. “Yaxley said that he was the one who had told them about the wards on the school weakening,” he murmured. “And I never anticipated that he would do that, that he could.”

Snape let out a harsh breath. He wasn’t entirely sure if he’d been conscious to hear that, or had heard it and simply forgotten. At least it meant there was some chance of persuading Harry never to trust Rosier again, to never depend on him. This was information from an independent source, not Snape. “That is Evan,” he agreed. “He was Voldemort’s loyal servant, for a certain value of loyal, because

Dumbledore would never have trusted him, and in those days there was no other side to which he could apply himself. And now that there is, he will do what he can to explode both your own plans and the Dark Lord's."

"There's one thing I don't understand," said Harry. "Why would he disguise himself as Dolohov and go to Azkaban, if he wasn't loyal to Voldemort?"

Snape curled his lip, but he did believe he had the answer to that. "Because he was interested in Dementors," he said, with a shrug. "He said more than once that he would like to be under the thrall of one, and experience how it affected his mind. That is the only response I can give you."

Harry shivered. "He is mad."

Snape nodded, confident he understood now. "He is," he said quietly, thinking of the days he had spent fighting beside Evan. The man had charmed other Death Eaters into trusting him, thinking of him as some tricky but ultimately honest rogue, and he had engineered their deaths each time. Snape had never given any sign that he noticed, lest he be Evan's next target. "And more dangerous than ever now, since Azkaban and his ability to play two sides against each other. Never trust anything he tells you, Harry. Kill him the next time you see him."

"I already said I would."

Snape looked steadily at his ward. "And I know now that I cannot protect you," he said. "No more than you can protect me. Blame yourself for not being here last night, if you wish, but it will have no more foundation than my own blame, and my own rage, that I could not protect you from going to Durmstrang, or from Diggle's knife."

Harry's hand clenched around his for a moment, then relaxed; Snape could feel a tremor of weakness racing up his right arm. "It has a foundation in the dreams," he said. "I'm to blame for that part. But, about other things—you're right. You're right." He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. "People are going to die in this war, and I

won't always be around to protect them. For all I know, Draco might fall from taking a curse in the back on the field of battle, or you might, or Connor.

"And you know what the problem is?" Harry smiled, though his eyes glistened with tears when he opened them.. "I realized last night that I care more about you than I ever did about my parents. I care more about Draco than I do about—almost everyone else. I like to think that I'm only devoted to principle, that if I had to choose between saving Draco and saving Hermione I would at least hesitate, but I know now that I won't. It's not a real choice. I would save Draco." He cocked his head at Snape. "And that's a hell of a thing to reconcile with 'people are going to die in this war.'"

Snape closed his eyes. "Will you allow me to help you reconcile it?" he asked. "It cannot compare, not entirely, because I am a different sort of man than you are, but I did fight Order of the Phoenix members during some battles, and then take what information I could to Dumbledore at night." Memories burned and flashed behind his eyes—memories of days when Bellatrix had been sane, and Albus had been noble, and Lucius had been a relentless killer and torturer. And now Bellatrix and Albus were dead by the magic of the boy sitting with his hand clasped firmly in Snape's own, and Lucius was as gentle as he would ever be, for the sake of the same person. How different we all are, or were. "It will help."

"Yes, thank you," said Harry, his voice coming more strongly. "In fact, any offer of help that you make me is gratefully appreciated, sir. How angry I got at you does show how much I love you, but it's time for me to start doing other things than just getting angry."

Snape opened his eyes. Harry was staring at him, and the tears had vanished from his eyes, and his voice was calm and sad and steady.

"There's going to be so much death, sir," he said. "I wouldn't be Pansy for anything in the world, right now. She stares at everyone, and I wonder how many of us are going to die in the war, and how, but of course I can't ask her.

“I want to make more of them die than there are of us dying. I want to know how to become reconciled to death, even Connor’s or Draco’s death, or yours, if that’s what I need to do. I want to know when killing someone is moral and when it isn’t. I think leaving Indigena Yaxley alive was the right thing to do, but maybe leaving Rosier alive was a mistake.” He took a deep breath, and shifted forward until Snape could feel the ending of his left wrist. “I want to know how to make war without losing my soul to it.

“All of that’s a grim study to ask you to help me with. So I really do need to do other things than get angry with you.” He was looking directly into Snape’s eyes now. “So that I can make sure you understand how much I love you, and how grateful I am that you’re alive, and I can share something of life with you outside that training.”

Snape put out his free arm, shifting so that the pillows behind him took his weight, and embraced Harry, drawing him nearer. Harry at once grabbed him, as if he’d been waiting for that signal, and hugged him right back.

This is not the end, Snape thought. Of course it is not. We have not spoken of his anger at my turning his parents over to the Ministry, among other things.

But it was a beginning. And he would not have to make all the changes himself, and he would not have to walk alone on the difficult road he had spied leading beyond the Chamber of Secrets.

Nothing was settled, and nothing was easy. Snape was beginning to think that if either of those things happened around Harry, he would have to be dead.

They would continue moving, and choosing from day to day, and likely arguing until they had hammered out all the sources of Harry’s anger and distrust, and Snape’s anger and overprotectiveness, and then they would find new sources of anger and distrust and overprotectiveness.

But they had made a good start on the motion here, and on the choices, and there was no law that said they must race to the end of the track.

Chapter Seventy-One: Not Since Merlin's Time

"I just don't see why you don't want to keep it."

Harry smiled as he turned the stone slowly over and over in his hand. Yes, he thought it would do. He had asked Hagrid, who ought to know, what the strongest kind of stone in the Forbidden Forest was, and the half-giant had brought him a sample. It was a simple gray color, egg-shaped like the rocks the centaurs valued, veined with gold and white. Harry didn't think it would break easily, which was his main requirement for a vessel to store the befouled magic in.

"Because it would corrupt my own magic, Draco," he answered Draco finally, sitting down on the bed and turning to face his boyfriend. Snape was out of the hospital wing right now, limping up and down the seventh-floor hallway to exercise his leg. He would walk with a limp for perhaps a year, Madam Pomfrey had warned him, but as long as he used the leg constantly, he ought to recover after that. Harry tossed the stone to Draco. "Here. You squeeze it, and make sure that it just doesn't feel strong to me because my hand is still weak." He looked at his arms and made a face. Madam Pomfrey had insisted that Harry stay "just a little longer" in the hospital wing, until she could make absolutely sure that the venom had done no damage to his arms. Since her magic revealed nothing, and the only symptoms of "damage" Harry had were trembling and weakness, he didn't see the point, but the matron had saved Snape's leg. He wasn't about to argue with her.

Draco tested the stone in both hands, then shook his head and tossed it back to Harry, who caught it easily. "It's an ordinary stone, Harry. Hard enough. It'll work. It won't shatter easily, which I think was the main thing you were worried about. But I say that you should keep that magic and work the foulness out of it."

"I haven't the least idea how," Harry said simply. He held the stone in his hand and closed his eyes, reaching for the magic that he'd swallowed from the Slytherin tie and from Voldemort. It had sunk into him and mingled with his own magic, but Harry still knew the difference, as easily as he could distinguish scum on the surface of a lake. The magic, hostile towards him still because of the intentions of

its wielders and what they'd been doing when he swallowed it, swarmed up his arms and into the rock.

"Then find out," said Draco, somewhere beyond the flood. "I think it would be better, Harry." His voice was deep with dreams. "Imagine what you could do with magic like that. Can you imagine? Maybe not. Then I'll imagine for you. Not just defeat Voldemort, though that's a priority, of course. But force other people to listen to and respect you. Set up your own magical school if you wanted, one that would take only the best of the best students. Create new spells and artifacts that would become the stuff of legend. Breed snakes that aren't basilisks and aren't disgusting monsters like the ones Voldemort makes. Make—"

"And that's precisely why I won't keep it, Draco," said Harry, opening his eyes and peering down at the stone. He nodded with satisfaction. The Slytherin tie had had much the same feeling as the rock did now. "I have no wish to see what I would become if I did those things."

Draco stared at him. "I don't understand you," he said. "I don't understand how in the world you got into Slytherin. You have some ambition, don't you?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Of course I do. You know what it is. To change—"

"Yes, but—" Draco made a chopping motion with his hand in the air. "Not compulsion. Forget about compulsion, even the unconscious kind that you'd exude if you weren't holding your power so tightly under control now. The sheer respect that someone would have to pay a wizard with your magic and Dumbledore's and most of Voldemort's is so enormous that you'd get what you wanted without much trouble, Harry. They'd accord your opinions more weight than the Minister's. They'd agree to what you wanted for the chance to get what they wanted. That's how politics works, Harry, especially around powerful wizards."

"It's the way Dumbledore made it work for him," Harry retorted. "Why should he have had as much power as he did otherwise? He was only a Headmaster. His opinion would have mattered to parents and

the board of governors, but no one else, really. It's his magic that made them look to him. Voldemort just takes a route of terror."

"And while Dumbledore was a bastard, some of his methods are worth adopting," Draco said in an encouraging tone. "Why not, Harry? That's the kind of politics that you'll have to work at the alliance meeting. It's the kind of politics that your allies will show up expecting. Since you're not that old and you don't have a powerful family at your back—though of course your Malfoy connections help make up for that—"

"And my being Black heir," Harry reminded him sweetly.

Draco blinked, then said, "Right," as if he'd prefer to forget about that. Harry watched in amusement as he waved a hand. "Your main political tool is your magic," he went on in determination. "And your reputation as Boy-Who-Lived, but you haven't tried to use that. It's your magic that's let you accomplish most of what you have so far. We won't mention the clever, talented, day-saving boyfriend, since that's self-evident." He wore the arrogant expression which made it impossible for Harry to tell how seriously he was taking his own words.

Harry laughed in spite of himself. "I don't disagree."

"Then why—"

"Because I don't want to intimidate people," Harry interrupted. "Of course I'm going to anyway. If someone backs down from an argument with me just because I'm a Lord-level wizard, then there's nothing I can do about that. But I won't set out to intimidate people. And I'd do that if I kept magic that wasn't mine sheerly as a political weapon. I'll use the magic that accident and Voldemort and my mother's machinations gave me."

"It was prophecy," said Draco. "Destiny. Merlin, Harry, don't start thinking of it as accident. Professor Snape," he added, turning towards the doors of the hospital wing as Snape came limping in, his face dark with pain and determination, "Harry thinks that he got his magic by accident."

Snape sank down onto his bed before he tried to respond, massaging his right leg. His eyes were closed. Concerned, Harry started to stand and go to him, but Snape replied in a voice that showed only faint strain. "It was an accident. A bizarre magical accident that no one could have predicted beforehand would fall out like that. No one had ever survived the Killing Curse."

Harry turned to Draco with a smile he knew was a bit vicious, then paused as Snape added, "That is what made it the cornerstone of a prophecy. Prophecies, by their very nature, predict things that do not happen in the world every day."

Draco could outmatch Harry in the vicious smile department, and he did so now. "You were saying, Harry?"

Harry shook his head and held up the stone that contained the befouled magic. "That I won't use this to achieve my ends until I can be sure that I know how to use it without dirtying the people around me, and I won't use my magic to force or scare people into doing what I want."

"What if it turns out to be the only way that you can free the magical creatures?" Draco had dropped the smile. He leaned forward and spoke with quiet intensity. "I think it might be, Harry. A powerful wizard can win them free, and in just a few years. Someone devoted to arguing won't win them free while he still lives."

"Then that's what happens," said Harry steadily. "I'm vates, and that means that I have to respect the free will of my enemies as well as my allies. The magical creatures know that. They wouldn't advise me to do anything in a different way, lest I fall from the path and stop being vates."

Draco sighed. "That magic is yours, Harry, if you can drain it. I think you should use it."

"If I can clean it, I will," said Harry. "To weave wards and heal hurts and defend people, not achieve my political ends. There have to be limits, Draco."

"You said something like that once before," Draco said. "That you don't want to see what you would become if you had so much magic. What does that mean, Harry?"

Harry shot an uneasy glance at Snape, but he had his eyes closed, and if he was attending to the conversation, he didn't show any sign of interfering. He turned back to Draco and answered, "I don't want to become unlimited, Draco, the way I might if I took my ability to drain magic so seriously that it was the only weapon I used. I don't want to intimidate other people with my mere existence. I want them free to argue with me, to hate me, to not fear me. And showing up to an alliance meeting blazing with power like that, most of it from other Lords, would not help me leave other people free."

Draco folded his arms, usually a sign of huffiness with him, but his voice was sure and his look steady. "I don't see why your will needs to be restrained for their sake, Harry. Surely your will is as important as theirs?"

"Yes," Harry snapped. "And I've told you, Draco, my will is to not be that powerful, to not lose myself to my magic. I'm more than the sum of my power. I do keep saying that. I don't know why you don't listen." He rose moodily to his feet and paced back and forth, but didn't storm out of the hospital wing. For one thing, he preferred not to run from his arguments with Draco; for another, Madam Pomfrey wouldn't like it.

"I suppose," Draco said after a few moments, "that I can't credit that it's your will because it's so different from what I want, from what I'd do with that level of magic."

Harry shot him a quick smile of thanks, and nodded. "I know," he said. "But it's what I'm going to do. And I promise, if I do work out some way of cleaning this—" he held up the stone "—then I can use it. Just not now." He tucked the stone into his pocket.

Draco sighed dramatically. "And you'll deprive me of my chance to appear in public as the boyfriend of an all-powerful wizard," he said. "That's just like you, Harry."

Harry was glad to change the tone of the discussion to teasing, especially when he looked over his shoulder and saw Snape watching him far too thoughtfully.

“Yes,” said Minerva softly, glad that she didn’t have to do this alone, that she had Godric and Rowena as well as Harry to help her. “I think that should do, Harry.” She extended her hand across the desk to him. “Take my hand, hold tight to it, and follow the lines you’ll see behind your eyes.”

Harry leaned forward from his chair, his eyes intent, but closing as he latched onto her wrist. Minerva eyed him for a moment, then leaned back in her own chair and closed her eyes as instructed. She felt Godric’s hovering presence ease closer, to lend her strength. Rowena stood on the other side of the room, to serve as anchor and guide; the Ravenclaw Founder knew the wards better than the others, and knew where the most essential, vulnerable places in Hogwarts were, the ones that had to be most protected. She would lead. Minerva would follow, with Godric linked to her through the bond that the Founders’ spirits and the Headmistress shared, and Harry would come behind that, lending them magic to weave the wards as needed.

“Follow.” Even now, Minerva wasn’t used to Rowena’s voice, high and aloof and passionate in what Minerva could only describe as an academic way. Minerva saw a shadow move across her eyelids, as though the Ravenclaw had just thrown one arm forward, and then the world opened around them. Minerva resisted the temptation to look with her physical vision, and hoped Harry had resisted it, too, even as she heard him gasp. Two conflicting sets of visual information would be too much for them, Rowena had explained. They would not go mad, but they would be confused and unable to help in the reweaving of the wards.

This world was one of transparent, glittering stone and dancing shadows—the way that Rowena saw Hogwarts, Minerva thought, rather than the clear, diamond-struck way Godric did. Rowena was a small, dark, winged shape against all the light, probably an eagle or raven. She spread her wings and soared through a tunnel that Minerva knew wasn’t there in the physical Hogwarts, calling all the

while. The sounds, whatever they might have been, burst in Minerva's ears as one word. Ward! Ward! Ward!

Minerva reached back to Harry and sideways to Godric, wordlessly asking for the magic to help her do this. It poured through her as more light: a flame from beside her, a sunrise from behind. She sent it reeling through the arm that pointed in the direction Rowena had gone, unable to suppress the sensation of flight even as she knew that she sat in one physical place, motionless.

Rowena's winged shape rose and dipped ahead of her, and Minerva directed the new ward to follow. It curled through the stones, supported and held upright as no ward had been since Albus's fall. Minerva guessed that had something to do with both the tide of magic behind her, and the fact that Harry could sense the Chamber of Secrets and keep the spell from draining downward.

Rowena led them a dance, flashing her wings here and here, and the ward followed, finding its anchors here and here. When the tunnel in the transparent stone was laden with the shimmering defensive magic, Rowena turned and flew towards Ravenclaw Tower. Concealing a chuckle—of course the Founder would think about defending her own House first—Minerva followed.

Rowena flew in a ring around the House common room and bedrooms, her voice ecstatic. Ward! Ward! Ward! Minerva tossed the ward, a glowing purple rope this time, after her, and it securely snared Ravenclaw Tower, guarding against Apparition, use of Portkeys, and any use of Dark Arts. Minerva was taking no chances, even though no other Death Eaters had been found in the House, or, indeed, anywhere in the school.

Rowena turned and circled slowly around Gryffindor Tower. Minerva felt confident enough to take the lead here, so many years had she spent sleeping in and climbing into and out of these rooms. The ward was red and gold this time, almost without her conscious choice. She could feel a moment of pure irritation from Rowena; she had wanted her own House wards in the Ravenclaw colors.

She said nothing about it, though, and pulsed downward, instinctively finding the weak places in the walls and showing them to Minerva: windows a Death Eater could fling Dark spells through, loosely fitted stones that could be more vulnerable than others to magic that manipulated the earth, small deserted rooms that no one knew about and might become targets of a Portkey. Minerva sealed them all. She expected to feel tired or empty at any moment—her usual reaction when she'd worked a great deal of magic—but the flow of power through her was as steady as ever. Godric's delight and Harry's stern resolve to guard the school might have been her own emotions.

Down and down and down, and they warded the Hufflepuff common room. In deference to Rowena's feelings, Minerva made these wards orange rather than yellow and black. The bird that represented the Founder did seem more at ease as she danced delicately around the bedrooms, showing the spells the way to go.

Minerva caught a flicker of another presence as they headed towards the dungeons. She hadn't yet met Helga Hufflepuff, but this certainly felt like a Founder's specter—a shy one. Minerva took a moment to glance aside from the path of light and shadow Rowena opened in front of her, and nodded gravely to the brown-haired woman she saw watching them. Helga's eyes widened, but she dipped her head, and then they flowed on towards the Slytherin common room and left her House's territory behind.

Harry took the lead, unexpectedly, as Rowena flew in slow, mournful circles around the Snake House's sanctuary. Minerva understood why a moment later. Godric had helped her guard their House, Rowena had led the guarding of hers, and Helga had probably lent unobtrusive support to the warding of Hufflepuff. But none of them were Slytherin, and all of them had reasons to hesitate concerning that House, either because of Salazar or because of their own personal history. Harry alone had positive feelings towards it. If someone didn't lend enthusiasm to its wards, then they were unlikely to hold strong.

Harry breathed life into Slytherin's wards, making them silver and green; Minerva didn't know if that was on purpose, or if those were simply the first colors he'd thought of. He tightened the wards,

weaving them double-deep, when Rowena would have said that one flight was enough. Then he rose without having to be told, leading the way towards the Great Hall, the next vulnerable place to defend.

Minerva frowned as she followed. She would have said that she had overcome her prejudices towards Slytherin; certainly she felt no animosity towards Harry or Severus, and she treated her students from that House as she treated all the others. But the idea of Slytherin and what it represented, or once had, evidently lingered enough in her mind to poison this effort. She would have to be sterner, more careful still, to insure that she did not push a quarter of the school towards Voldemort simply because he claimed a right to their loyalty.

“How deep would you say that Gloriana Griffinsnest’s hatred for werewolves runs, Professor?”

Snape lay on his bed in the hospital wing, absently massaging his right leg. He’d exhausted himself with walking practice yesterday—well, of course he had; it was a week since his wounding and he wanted to go back to his rooms—and Pomfrey had ordered him to stay still and rest today. Harry was pacing in front of the bed while he studied the letters he’d so far received promising attendance at the gathering on the vernal equinox. Snape was trying not to show how very much he envied his ward for being able to pace at all.

“She will never yield,” Snape said now, remembering the proud, haunted girl he’d known briefly in school. She’d been five years ahead of him, but she’d already lost her parents when he arrived at Hogwarts, and her hatred for werewolves was almost all anyone knew about her, almost all anyone was allowed to know. She appeared to have no hobbies except studying lycanthropes and how to kill them. “She carried a silver knife at the meeting last month, Harry. It was a calculated insult, when she knows how close a werewolf stands at your side. She was pushing to see how much you’d allow her to get away with. What does she say in the letter?”

Harry floated it over to him. Snape scooped up the parchment, noting absently that Harry used Levitation Charms as casually as he would a second hand now. Perhaps that was good, perhaps not. Snape would

at least wait a short time before suggesting some of the ideas he had for Harry to create or find a left hand.

Snape scanned the lines quickly, and nodded. "Yes. As I thought. She won't swear the oath not to use magic except in self-defense for 'personal reasons.' She'll kill Lupin if she can, Harry, and the state the laws are in would allow her to get away with it on the flimsiest of pretexts." He glanced up to see Harry standing still now, frowning. "And I trust that Mrs. Parkinson is attending the meeting as well?"

Harry nodded.

"Gloriana Griffinsnest is an expert at identifying werewolves," said Snape. "She could sense and expose Mrs. Parkinson's condition if she spent too much time with her."

Harry winced. "I can't let that happen," he murmured. "Mrs. Parkinson would lose custody of Pansy, her estate, her money, probably her freedom..."

Snape nodded again, though he was of the opinion that the witch he had fought beside in the Battle of Valerian would not meekly lie back and let the Ministry walk all over her. But the whole point of negotiation, and of Harry not simply facing Scrimgeour head on, was to achieve a resolution to the werewolf problem that both the werewolves and the Ministry could live with. "Then do not accept Mrs. Griffinsnest's response. You have a simple enough reason in her refusal to swear the oath."

Harry called the letter back to him, and then grinned at Snape as he laid it carefully in a pile of responses he'd rejected. "Planning the other meeting would have been a lot easier with you to help me," he muttered. "I can't believe how much you know about most of these people."

Snape shrugged, keeping his face relaxed and neutral. He doubted Harry would want to know most of the sources of his information. "We were both at fault there," he said. "And there are some ways in which you know the attendees better than I do." A smooth enough segue into a subject he'd meant to raise since Harry had mentioned,

casually, whom among the Hogwarts students had already spoken to him about attending. “Are you sure that your brother should come?”

Harry blinked at him. “Why not? He wouldn’t hurt me, you know that, and he can finish his formal Declaration to the Light in a public setting. I think he’d like that. Besides, it would help with any rumors that he resents me for being the Boy-Who-Lived when he’s not.” Harry rolled his eyes. “Stupid rumors, really. He was the one who told everyone at the trial that I’d bounced the Killing Curse back, and why would he have done that if he wanted to retain his prestige? But there are already a few articles muttering about Connor in the Prophet.”

“It is not his motivation I am worried about, so much as his...lack of experience,” Snape said smoothly. He would trust Harry in front of a crowd, and Draco, and a few of the other older Slytherins and Ravenclaws whose parents had trained them into calm, easy assurance in such situations. Even Zacharias Smith, though Snape disliked the boy for his arrogance, knew how to handle public speaking; his family would not have allowed him to assume full adult rights as heir if he didn’t. But Connor Potter did not. His honesty had served at the trial. Snape could imagine dozens of ways it would hurt Harry if he stood up and spoke whatever nonsense came into his Gryffindor head on the equinox. He would be sincere—blindingly, painfully sincere. But only Harry, or someone of his power, could get away with that kind of honesty at a gathering like this. Half-truths would be the least of the political tricks on stage.

Harry shook his head. “He wants to come, Professor, and he can add valuable testimony if someone asks about Voldemort. He’s faced him four times, after all, five if you count his being a baby during the first attack. He’s been possessed by him, and he can tell them what that’s like. And he’s my brother, and heir of a Light pureblood family. Yes, I want him with me.”

Snape stared into Harry’s eyes, and Harry stared back, with that slight, stubborn lift of his chin that told Snape he was not going to win this one. Snape narrowed his eyes and gave what concession he could. “So long as you keep him away from any lengthy and detailed speeches.”

“He did well at the trial.”

This, Snape could counter. “He was speaking on a subject he knew well, in front of an audience sympathetic to his message. Do you think that will be the case here?”

Harry lowered his eyes. “No.”

Is he seeing sense, or simply giving in to me? Without more proof, though, Snape could hardly accuse him of the last. “Then do not allow him to make speeches unless you are outmaneuvered and forced into doing so,” he said. “Or unless the subject is Gryffindor lack of tact,” he added, thoughtfully. “That, he could give an excellent example of it a hundred words or less.”

Harry laughed, voice low and delighted, and Snape had to resist the urge to say something entirely inconsistent with even his new relationship with Harry about how glad he was to hear the sound. Instead, he turned to a subject he thought he might get an answer out of Harry on, now that he was relaxed. “Why do you resist having power so mightily, Harry?” he asked. “Do you truly fear that you will lose yourself to the temptation?”

Harry stiffened in surprise, then nodded. “Yes, I do,” he said. “Dumbledore did.”

“You are a very different person than Dumbledore ever was,” said Snape, thinking, for one wistful moment, of what it would have been like if Harry had been alive fifteen years ago and leading the First War.

“But he was noble, wasn’t he, professor?” Harry stared intently at him. “Once upon a time. I can’t see you following him if he wasn’t. I can’t see Peter agreeing to become a sacrifice on compulsion alone. Even Sirius, though he owed Dumbledore more than anyone else, probably—I can’t see him just giving in and following a leader who was an ignoble hypocrite from the time he met him.”

Snape inclined his head stiffly. “He was noble, Harry, but he had already begun his fall by the time I turned to him for protection. That

is clear, now.” When he had come to Dumbledore in the summer of 1980, he had already heard the prophecy. Dumbledore must have been planning how and who to sacrifice to insure it came true. “I do not think you need to worry about the desire for power overcoming you.”

Harry shrugged. “Perhaps not, but why take chances? I’ve felt the temptation to compel people, and I made Greyback cease to exist simply because I was angry. If something like that happened and I had still more magic than I have now—” He shook his head. “Until I can learn to control it, this way is better.”

Snape raised his eyebrows, masking his surprise that Harry thought he needed more lessons in self-control. “I can help you in learning to control it. If, that is, you think the problem is one of temperament.”

Harry shook his head again. “What else would it be?”

Snape did not have a satisfactory answer for that himself—except one that would consist of Harry being able to wield any amount of magic perfectly well—so he let it go for now, and nodded to the letter that Harry held. “And this one is from?”

“Compton Belville.” Harry laughed again at the face Snape pulled. “Potter—I mean, Harry?” The voice was vaguely familiar, but Harry was sure that he’d never heard it so soft and uncertain. He felt Blaise and Millicent tense up on either side of him, and turned around to face the speaker.

When he saw her, Harry was glad that Draco had become too involved in his latest argument-by-letter with his father to come to dinner early. Marietta Edgecombe, the Ravenclaw girl who had cast the Blood Whip curse at him in October, stood behind him, biting her lip.

“What is it, Edgecombe?” Harry made sure that his voice was perfectly neutral. If she wanted to flinch at it—and she did—that was her affair. She certainly wouldn’t have trusted him if he’d offered her a warm smile and a congratulatory handshake, Harry thought.

“I’ve,” said Marietta, and stopped. Then she took a deep breath and started again. “I just wanted you to know that I have no animosity towards you. None. I never knew Gilbert was a Death Eater, either. I swear I didn’t.”

It took Harry a moment to remember that Gilbert was the first name of Rovenan, the Death Eater boy who’d cast the Entrail-Expelling Curse at him, and that Marietta had been his girlfriend. He nodded at her. “I believe you.”

Marietta paused for a moment, then added in a high, nervous tone, “And Madam Pomfrey told me when she finally managed to undo the spells on me that you’d killed Dumbledore.”

Harry eyed her wearily. Am I going to have to endure another suicidal charge? “Yes. He’d been using a Dark Arts spell called Capto Horrifer on the people in the Ministry. By the time I killed him, he deserved it. Believe me.”

“I do believe you!” Marietta clasped her hands before her as if she were about to fall on her knees at any moment. Harry wished she wouldn’t. Gestures of humiliation made him uncomfortable in the way that stares had almost ceased to do. “I was just going to say that I’m sorry, and I hope that you’ll accept my presence at the gathering you’re having on the vernal equinox.”

Blaise gave a sharp laugh. “Are you mad, Edgecombe? You try to kill our vates, and you think you can just count yourself as one of his allies as if nothing had ever happened?” Harry stared at him, frowning slightly. Blaise had never claimed himself as one of Harry’s allies in public before; informal guard duty was one thing, and this was something else. And he’d certainly given no indication that he thought of Harry as vates.

“I didn’t know what I was doing!” Marietta looked half-desperate. “I didn’t, I swear. I wasn’t myself during those months. Please, let me have another chance.” She nodded to Harry, and her face shifted further, towards an expression that Harry had often worn himself. She’d do whatever she thought necessary to survive, and for some

reason, she had decided that survival lay with him. “Look, Harry, I’ll be blunt. I think you’re going to win this war, and even if I didn’t think that, You-Know-Who is an idiot and a madman. I’ve never wanted to serve him. I want to join you.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “You’re still in school. Don’t you need your parents’ permission? And you could stay neutral, you know. I’m not Light, either.”

“Harry!” Blaise hissed. “You would let her join us?”

“What’s this us?” Harry asked, voice low enough that Marietta didn’t hear. Blaise only frowned, as if he didn’t know what Harry was talking about. Harry shook his head and faced Marietta again. “You’re welcome at the alliance meeting if you think about it some more,” he said. “Ask your parents’ permission, or attend with them. And you’ll need to swear an oath that you won’t use magic against someone else except in self-defense.”

“Thank you,” Marietta whispered. “I promise. They’ll want to come. They’ll swear the oath, too. This is—you don’t know what this means to us, Harry.” For one horrible moment, Harry thought she was going to kiss his hand, or, even more embarrassing, stoop and kiss the hem of his robes. But instead she bobbed a curtsy, then hurried away.

Harry turned back to his food, certain his face was as red as a Weasley’s.

“Would you really let someone so close to your back who once tried to slice it open?” Blaise hissed at him.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Millicent, in the calm, settled tone that she used when a conversation was shut. “She won’t get the chance. We’re going to be there, Blaise, and my father in particular has no interest in seeing his ally get hurt again.” She smiled at Harry, a not particularly pleasant smile. “We’ll obey the oath, Harry, but if someone casts a curse at you, we won’t consider it binding. Defense of you is defense of ourselves.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Thank you, Millicent," he chirped. "And if you cross the line and hex someone before they show lethal intent towards me, I hope you realize what it would cost your family."

Millicent grinned. "There it is," she said. "That is what we wanted to see, Harry, some indication that our vates is taking his safety as seriously as we are."

"Would you please not say the word in that tone?" Harry complained. "It sounds like a title when you say it."

Millicent hummed under her breath, and went back to eating. Unwilling to cause more of a scene than he had already, Harry joined her, but added that particular concern to the list already taking form in his mind: that his Dark pureblood allies seemed determined to serve as bodyguards. Very jumpy bodyguards.

"I must admit," Regulus murmured into Harry's ear, "this is a wonderful place to have the alliance meeting."

"Isn't it?" Harry gently removed the wards above the valley. "We'll have more than enough room for everyone, and it doesn't hurt at all that this place has such impressive natural magic."

He and Regulus nudged their brooms forward when the wards were gone, lowering themselves into the Woodhouse valley. Harry had time to be awed, in a way he hadn't been during the battle, by the sheer power brewing in the valley. It wasn't an aura, exactly, but a current, patrolling the valley's sides and the entrance in the woods that Hawthorn and the other werewolves had used during the battle, and never going beyond them. The closest analogy Harry could find for it was the pool of wind in Silver-Mirror.

He didn't know very much about place magic, he had to admit as he and Regulus touched down gently in grass still wet with rain and stiff with frost. Most wizards no longer studied it due to its inherent limitations; wands were portable, while place magic couldn't be drawn on outside of the valley or house or room in which it existed. But Harry remembered reading in the long letters of information Paton had sent him that some of the Opallines had made an attempt to

recapture place magic through studying the druidic arts. Harry planned to corner some of them during the alliance gathering and ask about it if he could. Paton's latest communication had made it sound as if half the attendees would be Opallines.

Woodhouse answered to no master. Harry could feel the current of magic ignoring him entirely. When he studied it, though, he could see that it centered on the quadrangle from which the Death Eaters had conducted their ambush during the battle here on October's full moon. The giant wooden house in the middle of the stone buildings fed the current and ate the current when it circled back around again. Wards so ancient had settled there that Harry couldn't decipher which spells underlay them. The most prominent, however, would do inventively nasty things to anyone who tried to burn the house. Harry made a mental note to warn Ignifer to be careful, again.

"Impressive," Regulus murmured, picking up on the last thing Harry had said. Harry glanced at him curiously. Regulus had agreed to come with him today without pause—Draco was with his parents, Snape wasn't cleared by Madam Pomfrey to fly a broom or Apparate yet, and Remus was remonstrating with several impulsive second-year Gryffindors—but Harry had thought it was solely because he wanted to spend time in Harry's company. Now, he had a look on his face that made it clear he wanted to say something more. Harry resigned himself to waiting until such time as Regulus wanted to speak.

"Impressive," said Regulus again, and then batted irritably at a load of water that the tree they were walking under had dumped down his neck. "Yes, Harry, you'll have to appear impressive during the gathering."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "I know that."

"Remember to keep it on your own terms," Regulus continued. "If they want you to speak on a certain topic, consider it carefully before you agree. And, well, I know you want to be honest, but a little diplomatic lying never hurt anyone." He smiled, but the expression was abstracted, and his gaze was on the far side of the valley. Harry

looked in that direction, but saw only the rising Welsh hills, cresting waves of brown and gray and green.

“You’re talking as if you won’t be there,” he said, to try and lighten the mood.

“I will,” said Regulus firmly. “But—after that, I’ll be around for only a short time, and I want you to remember the lessons to tackle other political situations.”

Harry stopped. “Why?” he asked, more sharply than he’d intended. His mind was playing over Regulus’s insistence on his being Black heir in a different light now. He narrowed his eyes and stared hard at Regulus. “Are you sick?”

Regulus blanched for half a second, then laughed. The laughter sounded forced, however. “No, Harry. Of course not. Where would you get such a silly idea?” His hand briefly rubbed along his left arm.

Harry snapped his fingers, and his magic pulled up the sleeve of Regulus’s robe before he could think to yank it back down. Harry stared in silence at what the disturbed garment revealed. The Dark Mark was clearer and blacker than he’d ever seen it, and was surrounded by raised, angry red-white flesh. Harry knew that Snape’s Dark Mark didn’t look like that.

He raised his eyes to Regulus’s face, and waited for some sort of explanation.

Regulus winced. “The Dark Lord’s laid traps in my Mark,” he admitted, his hand hovering above the symbol as if he didn’t actually dare to touch it. “We don’t know what they do yet—”

“We?”

“Severus and I.”

Harry scowled.

“We didn’t see any reason to worry you,” said Regulus defensively. “The traps won’t activate unless someone tries to use my Mark to contact me. But now, this has happened.” He nodded to the red flesh around the Mark. “I need to find a cure for it. I’m going into one of the portraits from Silver-Mirror. It leads me to a world where several of my ancestors discovered healing for sicknesses or wounds that were destroying them in the past.” He brightened briefly. “Cousin Arcturus, who built Wayhouse, used it once for an incurable bee-sting,” he added.

Harry’s mind had shifted into a different path. “Do you think you can wait until the meeting is over, then?”

“Yes,” said Regulus. “The redness is advancing slowly, swelling a little more each week. I can wait until the equinox. And then I’ll enter the portrait. Time slows down in that world. The swelling won’t advance any more once I’m inside, I think.”

“You think,” said Harry.

“This is the Dark Lord, Harry,” said Regulus gently. “Nothing is certain with him. But yes, I think so. And I want to stay here until the alliance meeting, and you can’t stop me from doing that. Not without being a hypocrite yourself.” He raised his head and challenged Harry with his eyes to deny that he’d often hidden his own pain and his own wounds because he didn’t want other people to worry.

Harry sighed and glanced the other way. “If you’re sure—”

“I’m sure.”

Harry nodded miserably. He didn’t like this. He wished Regulus had told him beforehand so that he could try to heal him. On the other hand, touching or healing the Dark Mark at all might activate the traps hidden in it. Perhaps it was best that he hadn’t known about it and had time to convince himself that he could do something to speed up the healing.

“Now,” said Regulus, with forced lightness, “shall we readjust the wards?”

Harry nodded, and turned to face the valley, forcing lightness on himself, too. If he didn't alter the wards about the valley, then no one would be able to enter or find it except himself. Harry had to insure that anyone who'd sworn the oath could enter. A fine thing if the alliance meeting failed because people were bouncing off his defensive spells.

A week later, it was the first day of spring, the time of the balance of Dark and Light, and Harry stood on the high northern side of Woodhouse and looked down at a sight supposedly not seen since Merlin's time.

Tents crowded Woodhouse, shimmering with spells to counteract the cold and the unpleasant ground, which had less frost than during Harry's last visit, but more mud. The current of magic rushing around the valley had altered when it felt the first spells cast, but to Harry's relief, none of them had triggered a defensive reaction. Now the current was ignoring the tents again, as if wizards were not worth its time.

The tents shimmered in various colors, sometimes the hues of various family crests—Lucius had a pompous blue-gray tent that covered a lavish spread of land, and the Opallines' tent blazed with the blue and gold of the sea and the sun—but more often deep green or gold in celebration of both spring and their occupants' allegiance. All the tents flew flags depicting old family symbols, however. There were far more attendees than Harry had thought there would be at first, nearly five hundred.

Harry let his gaze travel from the Dark pureblood tents just beneath him to the brilliant golden ones clustered near the forest choking Woodhouse's one ground entrance. Those were the Irish Light pureblood families. Cupressus Apollonis, Ignifer's father, had written requesting to come, and along with him had come most of his allies. Harry hadn't yet met the Apollonis patriarch face to face, and was reserving judgment until he did. It was his unbiased opinion, however, based on the infertility curse he had cast on his daughter, that Cupressus was a bastard.

South from the golden tents was the Opalline gathering, which looked more like a refugee camp with the number of children running around and shouting in both Manx and English. Harry smiled as he watched one of them tackle another and send her sprawling with a loud, inelegant cry. Someone who might have been Calibrid herself, from the long fall of pale hair, stooped down and began untangling them.

Next to the Opallines, as if trying to prove something, the Bulstrodes had set their tent, huge and dark and imposing. Their pennant was a black stone on a white field, and the motto *Duramus*. The Parkinson pavilion was small next to it, a deep green streaked with gold, their pennant a flower; Harry couldn't make out the motto from here, as the letters were too small. Both Hawthorn and Pansy were attending, though Pansy had withdrawn so far from the rest of the world in the last few weeks that Harry was privately surprised she had chosen to do so.

Starrise's circle of sun and stars flapped near them, and Harry frowned a little. He'd seen Augustus already, carrying an enormous staff of white wood bound with gold that Harry remembered from the trial. The staff had sparked with magic that Harry instinctively distrusted. With him was a pale young man Harry hadn't met before—Tybalt's brother, he supposed, the heir, Pharos. And there was a gull continually wheeling over his tent, which Harry didn't like at all.

The tent next to that one made him smile. Connor had contacted the Potter solicitor, Proudfoot, and assigned him to figure out what colors the Potter tent and flag were supposed to be. As a result, there was now a garish white-gold tent standing proudly among the others, and the flag depicted a—thing. Harry hadn't figured out whether it was supposed to be a crown, or a set of antlers, or a thorn tree. It was larger than it strictly needed to be to contain Connor, but that was all right. Most of the other Gryffindor students who'd come were staying there with him, including all four of the younger Weasleys. Fred and George were the main reason that Harry wished their tent was further away from the Starrise one.

Draco and Harry and Snape had argued over a tent for him, until Harry put his foot down on any finery. Snape had grudgingly agreed that Harry could share his own small, dark, and utterly unassuming

tent. Draco had carried on longer, until Harry pointed out that he couldn't use the Black colors because he didn't carry that name, and he couldn't stay in the Malfoy pavilion without everyone assuming that Lucius controlled him, and he couldn't create his own crest because he had no surname chosen and no ideas for a symbol that wouldn't look ridiculous.

Besides, along with the value of impressing people, there was the value of encouraging them to underestimate him. Harry was all for the latter. Even though he had taken Snape's advice and eliminated anyone from the gathering who seemed to want to come only to cause trouble, he knew there were people here who wished him less than well.

He took a deep breath and shook his shoulders, letting some of the tension fall away from them. Whatever happened now, this was still an achievement, to have this many Light and Dark families in the same place without a war to cause it. He could be proud of that.

He took up his Firebolt and flew down towards the valley, ready to begin.

"They look fine," said Narcissa, gently settling the dark blue robes around Draco's shoulders. "Don't they, dear?"

Lucius didn't look up from writing invitations at the table in the corner of their tent. "You chose them, Narcissa," he said. "I will know who to blame if anything goes wrong."

Draco put his shoulders back and made a face at the expression in the conjured full-length mirror. The dark blue robes weren't the best color for him, but he had little choice as to their shade. Lucius was writing invitations for a festival to be held on his sixteenth birthday, which would formally celebrate Draco's elevation as Malfoy magical heir. Between then and now, in such a public gathering as this, he couldn't wear plain robes, because he was, technically, the heir, and he couldn't wear any color that would indicate he'd been acknowledged to everyone already. That eliminated a surprising number of hues. Dark blue was the only acceptable one of those left.

Besides, Draco had to admit, the robes did fit. His mother had been very careful about that.

Narcissa bent down to kiss the back of his head. "You have grown, Draco," she said softly.

Draco nodded. He didn't entirely recognize himself, but that wasn't entirely a bad thing, either. The robes made him look paler than normal, and made his blond hair stand out like a coronet on his head. Fastening it back was a band of beaten silver, worked into the Malfoy crest and set with small blue-gray stones that Draco didn't know. He looked adult, stern, responsible.

"Draco."

He blinked and met his mother's eyes in the mirror again. Narcissa's hands were pressing on his shoulders, and her face was unusually set.

"Do not let Harry overwhelm you in this meeting," she murmured. "All eyes will be on him—that's hardly avoidable—but those in the know will be looking at you as well. Do honor to your family, your name, and your power." She stepped back, but didn't yield his gaze. "I care for Harry, but it is more difficult to appear to advantage when your consort is so much more powerful than you are."

Draco nodded, his heartbeat slowing again. He'd thought for a moment that Narcissa had a much sterner message to deliver. "I'd thought of that, Mother. Don't worry. Everyone who sees me will know that I'm a Malfoy." He lifted his head, and found his expression working into the haughty defiance he'd seen on many of his ancestors' faces in the confirmation ritual.

"Good," Narcissa murmured, smiling again. "And, Draco, that reminds me. Has Harry agreed to the courting ritual yet?"

Draco sighed. "No. He hasn't." It had been almost two months since his initial question, as this was the twentieth of March, but other than reminding Harry gently about it, he hadn't wanted to press it. Harry had had politics to deal with, and then Snape and Voldemort, and

then politics again. Besides, if Harry meant to refuse, Draco was sure he would have done it by now.

It was far more likely that Harry just didn't think about it often. Draco made a rueful face, and caught his mother's eye again.

"It might not be a bad idea to ask for a commitment by the end of the gathering," said Narcissa calmly. "I do think that Harry will accept you, Draco, but the sooner you start courting him, the better it will suit your own impatience, the fortunes of our family, and Harry himself."

Draco nodded, his resolve steeling. He could do that. He'd seen Harry that morning before they flew to Woodhouse, the way his eyes were focused and his mind was racing. His determination beat off him like another form of magic. In such a mood, he thought better, and Draco was confident that he could make a clear-headed decision.

And, of course, a gathering like this would show Harry off to advantage to a great many pureblood families. It would be no bad thing to make sure that most people knew that the rumors of Harry undergoing a courting ritual were not just rumors, but had a solid basis in reality, and he was not, therefore, a suitable target for marriage or joining proposals.

And I want it, Draco admitted to himself, and that sealed the matter as far as he was concerned.

"Are you ready, Millicent?"

Millicent stepped back and critically examined herself in the mirror that her mother had conjured. Then she nodded. The formal dress robes would hang no better on her than this, and if she lingered much longer, then she might cause her family to miss the start of the meeting. She didn't want to do that. Most of the wizards and witches here were meeting Harry for the first time. It would be seen that the Bulstrode family stood at his side, and was honored with a place in his inner circle.

Millicent shook her head for a moment, amused at herself. She was capable of thinking in two modes at once—of Harry as a political

leader who had the ability to influence the Bulstrode luck, for better or worse, and of Harry as the fellow Slytherin she had to scold out of wounding himself for the sake of practicing healing magic. She had tried before to catch herself in a contradiction, to find the impulse to forgive him for being an idiot or despise him when he was acting like a leader, and she couldn't do it. That pleased her. From what her father said, many of the people the Dark Lord had attended school with had not been able to pull themselves out of seeing him as one or the other. But Millicent had two more years in Hogwarts with Harry, and Merlin knew how much time as someone who followed him in politics, or war, or both. She needed that mental flexibility.

Her father swept towards her, studying her for one moment with intent dark eyes. Millicent stood straight and proud under his gaze. She was taller than most of the boys in school, and had features that kind people described as "strong." She found that she didn't really care when he looked at her like that. She was his heir, and that was all that had ever mattered.

"I have heard some rumors that disturb me, Millicent," said her father gently. "It seems that there may be at least one agent of the Dark Lord in the crowd, sent to assassinate or maim Harry. And though of course no one knows who this agent might be, I have heard it repeated too many times to make me think the gossip has no foundation." He cocked his head. "It disturbs me," he repeated, "to think that some people do not have the proper respect for the vates the Bulstrodes have allied themselves with."

Millicent's eyes widened as she caught a flicker of darkness traveling around the outside of her father's hand. It was rare that he allowed his magic to manifest like that at all, never mind in one of the abilities their family kept mostly secret. He had once told Millicent that the only people who knew what Bulstrode blackfire looked like were either of their blood or dead.

"I gave you permission once to use your gifts to defend Harry," said Adalrico, catching her gaze. "I give it to you again. And if you are closer to him than I am when the assassin moves, and it does not seem likely that he will notice it himself, then do not hesitate to wield the blackfire."

Millicent blinked and nodded. "We are losing our secrecy, then, Father?" she asked.

Her father chuckled. "Do not say that we are losing it, Millicent, but...gaining respect. Perhaps it's time to emerge from hiding beneath our stone."

Millicent bobbed a curtsey, and her father's hand briefly traced through her thick, heavy brown hair. Then she stood up, and they turned to face Elfrida.

Millicent thought her mother looked lovely. For one thing, she wore robes covered with the pale silver filigree that denoted puellaris training; for another, she held Marian in her arms, since it was only right that both the family's magical heirs attended a gathering like this. Marian was over a year old now, and she was reaching towards the blackfire around her father's hands with no sign of fear. Elfrida gave her a fierce, adoring smile which she widened a moment later to include her husband and older daughter.

"We should give them a show," she said quietly, and then turned and stepped to the entrance of the tent.

Millicent let a spark of blackfire flare on her fist in answer to her father's gaze, and then followed.

Are you certain that you wish to go through with this?

Hawthorn used her hands to ask Pansy the question. They both knew the necromancers' sign language well enough, since Dragonsbane had used it to communicate with Pansy since she was born, and with his wife before that. But Hawthorn had never really imagined using it with her daughter.

She found she was startled by the changes in Pansy, and disturbed, despite her pride in her daughter for following this path. Pansy wore robes that completely concealed her body now, except for her hands, flashing quick responses to her mother's concern. Now and then, Hawthorn saw one of her sleeves flutter in the tug of no mortal wind.

And she wore a ring with an enormous red stone on her left hand, though Hawthorn knew their family had never owned such a ring, and it had not belonged to Dragonsbane, either. She was beginning to believe that the spirits of the dead spontaneously formed such jewelry for those who chose to talk with them.

I'm all right, Mother. The crowd in Hogwarts's Great Hall is smaller than this, and I've got used to seeing their deaths. The visions here will be new, but after a few hours, I'll have my balance.

Hawthorn nodded slowly. Then she sneezed. Someone was walking past the tent draped in coils of perfume that irritated her sensitive werewolf nose. She shook her head and embraced Pansy for a moment.

"Leave at any moment you need to," she whispered. "I would never think less of you for that, you know."

I know, Mother.

Pansy hid her face even from her mother, now, but she had a way of tilting her head to the side when she smiled that she still retained, and that Hawthorn could make out even under her shapeless hood. She did it now, and then turned and walked forward calmly into the world outside the tent.

Hawthorn followed, slowly. She had loved Dragonsbane since the last days of his training in necromancy, and had accepted then that she might lose him someday soon, and he wouldn't be able to tell her beforehand when that day was, though he knew it himself. She should not have such a problem becoming reconciled to the knowledge that Pansy, too, carried the date of her death in her head now, and had to have accepted it, or the dead would not have let her advance in her studies.

If Pansy had made the sacrifice willingly, and Hawthorn had already lived through the love and loss of one necromancer, why did it bother her so much to think that Pansy might die next year, or the year after that, or in a few years?

Because it has nothing to do with the path she follows. No mother should have to bury her child.

Harry strode rapidly towards the dais that he and Regulus had shifted rocks from the valley's sides to build at the southern end. There was plenty of open ground there, not crowded with tents, and people would be able to see him when he stood on it. Besides, it was almost three o'clock, the time when Harry had said he would make a welcoming speech. He did not particularly want to make a welcoming speech, but it would let him get a sense of the audience response to him, and perhaps he could get some of the sillier questions—whether he would ever consent to Declare himself a Lord, for example—out of the way at once.

His mind was rushing forward, and for a long moment he did not notice that someone was walking beside him, matching his pace, instead of flowing sluggishly towards the stage like the rest of the crowd. He looked sideways, and found Ignifer Apollonis there, her yellow eyes still. Flames leaped up through her palms and cracked briefly. Harry wondered how he had made her so angry, and then realized the real target of the flames when Ignifer inclined her head towards the man walking on her other side.

"Harry," she said, "vates, leader of my alliance and the holder of my soul, I would like to introduce my father, Cupressus Apollonis."

Harry nodded, as if he had expected the elaborate series of titles she'd given him, and then wheeled to the side so that he could see the man who'd cursed his daughter and magical heir to be infertile for as long as she remained dedicated to the Dark.

Cupressus was older than Harry had expected, definitely in his sixties; of course, Ignifer herself was in her thirties, so Harry supposed that wasn't a surprise. He had golden hair touched with so much white that it appeared almost the color of a Malfoy's or an Opalline's. His yellow eyes shone like a hawk's. Harry saw magic pulsing and shivering in the web of silver rings on his hands, each set with a different stone. His eyes narrowed briefly as he realized that there were twelve rings, twelve stones. Cupressus had six fingers on either hand.

"I am quite glad to meet you, Mr. Potter," said Cupressus, his voice deep and strong, a good singing voice. He inclined his head to Harry.

"Harry," said Ignifer, voice light and perfect with rage. "I introduced him to you as Harry for a reason, Sir Apollonis. He has forsaken his surname."

"So sorry," said Cupressus, inclining his head further. "Of course. I should not have forgotten. When such shame as your parents' has been spread far and wide, it is a dishonor to your own sacrifice to forget your disassociating yourself from it." He produced a polite smile he seemed to have hidden under a handkerchief, like a stage magician's egg.

Harry understood the reason behind Cupressus's "forgetfulness" then. He'd wanted to insult his daughter more than he'd wanted to either insult Harry or get into his good graces. He revised his earlier judgment to one closer to the truth. Cupressus Apollonis was not just a bastard, but an unmitigated bastard.

"Mr. Apollonis," he said, and inclined his head. "Ignifer has told me almost nothing about you, and now I see why. I know you already. All the best parts of yourself are reflected in your daughter."

Cupressus's face assumed a complex expression. "Is that true?" he murmured. "I would have said that you knew only a distorted reflection of me, Harry, as she is without the Light to make those characteristics shine."

"She has given her loyalty to me, and saved my life," said Harry, with an elaborate shrug. "So I see her by that light."

Cupressus sighed. "And thus I must apologize to you, Harry. She would have brought you honor had you known her fifteen years ago. Now, though she still carries the name Apollonis, she carries a taint, also, within her, given her Declaration. Any loyalty she brings you is stained, any motive she might have for saving your life an ulterior one. I feel compelled to warn you of this, since you do not seem to realize what being Declared Dark means."

“Father.”

Harry could feel the heat billowing up behind him. He turned his head, and saw Ignifer wreathed with flames. She spat something in Latin, too quick for him to follow. It wasn't a spell, though, or Harry would have had to defend Cupressus. He remembered, a moment later, that the Apollonis family taught its children to speak Latin as a first language.

Cupressus responded, voice gentle and tolerant. Ignifer said something else, and this time Harry caught “magic of the Dark.”

He shook his head, marveling at the spectacle of a father who hated his daughter enough to try to humiliate her and get her punished in the middle of an alliance meeting, and stepped more firmly between Ignifer and her father. “I know Ignifer,” he told Cupressus. “And Light and Dark both mean less to me than how a wizard or witch acts. At the moment, sir, I hope to have better acquaintance with other Light wizards. If I allowed your actions to represent them all to me, then I would send them out of the meeting at once.”

He turned his back, and grasped Ignifer's elbow. He had grown enough to make his escorting her look less than ridiculous. He wouldn't stay here or let her stay here, because Cupressus would only have another retort, and he would try to make Ignifer break her oath to use magic only in self-defense. “My lady?” he asked, purposely using a title that Ignifer's outcasting from her family said she shouldn't receive. “Will you honor me with your presence on my journey to the stage?”

Ignifer nodded stiffly, once, and walked quickly off. Harry walked more slowly, forcing her to slow as well, and she let out several harsh breaths before saying, “You see how he is. I'm sorry, but I thought you should meet him that way, rather than in the crowd before the stage. Once allow him to speak, and he won't hush. And of course all of his questions will be so reasonable that no one could forbid them without looking dangerous or outrageous.” Her voice creaked and cracked and ran with poison.

Harry nodded. "Thank you for letting me know."

Ignifer glanced sideways at him. "Are you still going to let him be part of the alliance?"

Harry stared at her in turn. "Are you all right?" he asked, wondering if her father had cast a compulsion spell on her. It sounded like something Cupressus would do, and it would explain her temper—though so would hatred of her father. "Of course not, Ignifer. He insulted you."

"He's my father," Ignifer said, biting off the words. "That's what he does. I don't want you to lose a powerful ally just because of me."

"It would be because of him, not you," said Harry firmly, guiding her around the first rows of seated witches and wizards. Some had conjured chairs; others had Transfigured stones or logs or humps of grass. He could feel eyes boring into him, lingering on him, coming at him in sidelong glances. He didn't care. Reassuring Ignifer was more important. "Quite apart from any insults he offered you, he's a fanatic for the Light. I know the type," he added dryly, thinking of Marietta Edgecombe as she had been, of the Order of the Phoenix members, of Dumbledore, of his mother. "He won't get along with my Dark allies. That means that I'm going to reject his further participation in the alliance out of hand. He's already doomed himself. I hope he enjoyed the fight with you, since it cost him so much."

Ignifer's hand closed convulsively on his for a moment. "Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you."

Harry squeezed her hand back, then parted from her at the end of the third row of seats from the stage. Ignifer sat down next to Honoria Pemberley, whose face lit up at once when she saw her. She leaned closer to Ignifer and whispered something. Ignifer gave her a look that combined weariness and wariness. Honoria laughed and laid a gentle hand on Ignifer's arm. Harry turned away to hide his smile at Ignifer's confused look.

He climbed up the steps to the stage, piled boulders fitted close to each other with a mortar spell that Peter knew, and turned to survey

the crowd. Hundreds of expectant faces stared back at him. Harry gave a small nod when he recognized someone. He couldn't restrain a smile when he saw Draco, Millicent, Pansy, and Connor, and again when he caught sight of Paton Opalline with a child on his shoulders, waving solemnly at him. He knew the smiles were being taken note of and remarked upon, but he couldn't care about that. There were certain things he saw no reason to hide.

He settled himself with a shake of his shoulders, as he had on the ridge above the valley, and then turned towards the forest at the western edge, behind the rows of seats. If he had calculated the time correctly, then a slight surprise, and one of the most blatant points he could make, was about to arrive.

Yes. He had cast a spell already to make himself sensitive to slight vibrations in the earth, and he felt them now. They were coming.

He whispered the spell he had used in the press conference in December, the one that let him sound as if he were speaking directly into the ears of each person. "Welcome," he said clearly, "to Woodhouse. I wish to give wizards and witches, purebloods and Muggleborns and halfbloods like myself, those of Dark and those of Light, my acknowledgment and my thanks for coming, but we are not quite complete. A moment—ah!"

By now, the sound of hoofbeats was audible to everyone. Harry smiled slightly as a group of centaurs, twenty strong, cantered out of the woods and towards the stage. The audience turned to stare, and murmurs rose like high tide. Harry bowed to the lead centaur, whose name was Magorian, and he slid to his knees in return. The rest of the centaurs likewise bowed in a rippling flourish, dipping and rising so quickly that one was upright again almost before the next was down, and only those wizards and witches who sat to the sides of the wide central aisle could get the full effect.

"Now," said Harry, lifting his head and letting the other wizards and witches see his wide, benign smile as the centaurs took their places near the front, "we are—"

A roar interrupted him. Harry wheeled, and saw a blazing shape looming into view behind him. The scales shone iridescent, and fractured the sun into rainbows. The dragon, an Antipodean Opaleye, flew with swift grace towards the stage, and came down beside it in a landing so neat that her wings barely raised a wind. Nor had the wizards and witches in the crowd done much stirring. Harry supposed some of them were shocked senseless, but the dragon's speed had prevented it, too.

A cloaked figure leaped from the dragon's back. Harry recognized Acies's smell of smoke and fire before she bowed to him and caught his eye for one intense, wild moment.

"The Singers greet you," she said, pitching her voice into a roar that everyone in the audience could hear, "Harry, vates."

Harry could not have asked for a more dramatic gesture. Yes, there was fear in some of the eyes that watched him, but more awe. It didn't hurt that Opaleyes were the most beautiful of the dragons, or that this one had settled down beside the stage, immovable, displaying no interest in the wizards and witches as snacks.

And he needed no lessons in how to take advantage of something like this.

"Now," he announced, turning back to the gathering with a smile more serene than before, "we are all here, and can begin."

Chapter Seventy-Two: A Path of Green and Gold

Harry could feel the temper in the valley changing almost from moment to moment. His coming to the stage had begun the alteration; the centaurs had changed it, and the entrance of Acies with the dragon had changed it yet again. He wanted to speak now, while it held overtones of both fear and awe, rather than wait.

“Most of you know me, by reputation if not by sight,” he began. “My name is Harry—I was born Harry Potter, but I have permanently severed myself from that last name, due to the actions of the witch who bore me and the wizard who sired me. My brother still carries it, and I have no wish to sever that particular bond.” He gave a little bow in Connor’s direction. Connor stood up and bowed back. He was enjoying this, from the wide grin on his face. Harry relaxed. See, Snape, he’s not going to embarrass me. Just in case, though, I won’t give him any speeches to make. “I also am becoming vates, the wizard who tries to free the magical creatures from their webs and encourage them to coexist with wizards while making sure that neither their wills nor anyone else’s is impinged upon.”

A hand rose in the crowd. Harry smiled when he saw that it came from a cluster of wizards in golden robes, indicating their devotion to the Light. “Yes?” he asked. Truly, almost anyone else was welcome to speak at the moment, as long as it wasn’t Cupressus Apollonis.

“What do you mean by becoming this vates thing?” asked an unfamiliar voice, which sounded like an older witch’s. “I thought you had already achieved that title.”

Harry shook his head. “It is not a title that a wizard or witch can achieve and then keep,” he said calmly. “It is a task I must always be proving my claim to. If I use compulsion or impinge on the free will of another, such as by setting house elves free without consulting their owners or not working for their freedom once I know about their webs, I fall from the path. And it is not a title, not the way that Lord or Lady might be said to be. I must keep changing, moving forward all the time.” He smiled at the disconcerted expression on the witch’s face, and then turned back to the crowd. “Are there any other questions about what a vates is meant to achieve?”

There seemed to be none for now. Harry nodded. "I am other things, some of which you already know. For example, I am a Lord-level wizard, but not a Lord. I do not plan to Declare, ever." He hoped that might get rid of stupid questions about Declarations for Light or Dark, and if anyone intended to try to force him to those Declarations, they would know that it was useless. "I am also the heir of the Black family, thanks to the graciousness of Regulus Black."

"Do you claim the surname Black?" That was probably Edward Burke, his voice nasal and irritating.

"No," said Harry easily. "I have not yet chosen the surname I will wear, if any. As I am legal heir to the Black family, I was not required to take their name."

"Is it true that you've sworn an oath to fight for the rights of werewolves?" asked someone else. Harry had the feeling that he knew the voice, that it might have been someone who was in the meeting in February. He could not identify it at once. "And that the blood took the form of the Black crest when you made it?"

"Both are true," Harry confirmed calmly. "But the blood took the form of the Black crest because I used the Black oath-taking knife. And the oath to fight for the rights of werewolves does not mean I will invade the Ministry and demand that they follow my will. I think Minister Scrimgeour might have something to say about that." He smiled as a few people chuckled. "I intend to find a solution to the problem that both sides can accept, and that will involve persuasion, politics, speaking to the Wizengamot, petitions, and likely making common cause with people who want similar things. It will not involve use of magic to overwhelm someone else's will."

"What do you want to accomplish with this alliance, exactly, Harry?" That was Lucius's voice, and Harry nodded to him, grateful for the opportunity to lay out his goals.

"I intend to change life in the ways that I have said I would," Harry said. "I think the treatment of most magical creatures is a blemish on the honor of the wizarding world. The web that confines house elves

to their service is particularly so, since it makes them long to serve instead of simply live under their web with self-knowledge, the way that the centaurs and the unicorns have done. I intend to unbind those webs once I have knowledge and opportunity to do so and once everyone involved in them has agreed to it.”

“What is the benefit for your allies in this?” Adalrico’s voice was near the stage, nearer than Harry had expected him to be. Of course, he might want the other spectators to see how close the Bulstrode family stood to Harry.

“In knowing they have done the honorable thing, of course,” said Harry, and then laughed when he saw the looks of dismay on many faces. “And in accomplishing more of their own magic and furnishing more of their own lives,” he continued. “We can perform simple cleaning and cooking charms to sustain ourselves, but most of us prefer to rely on house elves, for no reason except that we have always done it. We will have new business opportunities as well, since the magical creatures who choose to mingle their lives in the wizarding world will need help, advice, and special magic.” He met Magorian’s eyes as the crowd reacted to that. The lead centaur scraped his hoof slowly on the ground, as if he were considering this. In truth, he and Harry had discussed this in the last few weeks, and he had agreed that Harry could say this, though of course there was no guarantee that a centaur traveling among wizards would choose to rely on wizards for what he needed. Harry nodded once, and then turned back to the crowd.

“I admit it might sound like a great sacrifice for very little. But we have walked in a secure world that has nearly nothing to do with reality. Our house elves are not willing, natural servants, but slaves constrained to like their service with ancient magic. Werewolves are not evil beasts who chose their curses, but victims of a web that transfers itself through the bite. When we shun them and push them out of our society, we are doing what Voldemort, among others, wants us to do.” Some people actually covered their ears, Harry saw, as if they couldn’t bear to hear the Dark Lord’s name spoken. “He used one of his werewolves, Fenrir Greyback, as a tool for political intimidation, and we do nothing but oblige him when we give up on those wizards and witches who suffer from lycanthropy. Currently,

werewolves cannot hold paying jobs, and cannot have custody of their children, even when they are related by blood. Is it any wonder that many of them become desperate and cruel, trying to survive? This is an entirely avoidable problem, now that we have the Wolfsbane Potion to insure that werewolves can survive the full moon nights with their minds intact. We are the ones being cruel in the first place. And if a werewolf bites one of our children in vengeance for his treatment, then we are the ones to blame.”

“Does the Wolfsbane Potion actually work?” someone asked from a section of the crowd containing mostly Dark wizards. “I’ve heard rumors that it didn’t.”

“Yes, it does.” Harry scanned the crowd slowly, though he had already spotted Remus during his initial gazing. Showing himself apparently a bit less observant than he really was had its advantages. “Professor Lupin, will you come here, please?” he added.

Remus strode easily out of the crowd and towards the stage. Harry could feel their eyes raking him, trying to see an aura of evil fluttering above him. But with his back turned, he had few identifying features, and even when he turned, only the people sitting close to the stage could make out his amber eyes and the gray streaks in his hair. He nodded at them, as if amused, and then looked at Harry.

“Will you tell us about the effects of Wolfsbane Potion?” Harry stepped back, sweeping a bow as he deferred to an expert. He wondered how many people in the crowd would realize that he was granting Remus a chance to speak that he would never have had in a normal gathering. Werewolves couldn’t legally testify at trials, or even talk to informal public gatherings without fear of persecution, as long as most people knew they had lycanthropy.

“Of course.” Remus faced the crowd with his usual mild gaze that hid the strength of the will he’d developed after his year at the Sanctuary. “My name is Remus Lupin,” he said, as Harry whispered the spell that would carry his voice into the spectators’ ears as well. “I have been a werewolf since I was a child, a victim of Fenrir Greyback’s bite. I am also the godfather of Connor Potter, and watched over both him and Harry as they grew. I was Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for the 1993-1994 school year, and I currently hold the post of Gryffindor Head of House there.”

“How can the Headmistress have hired you?” demanded Augustus Starrise. Harry rolled his eyes, glad that he stood behind Remus’s shoulder and Augustus couldn’t see him do it.

“She does not pay me a salary, but gives me room and board, to cooperate with the laws,” said Remus peacefully. He paused, then glanced at Harry. Harry understood what he was asking permission to refer to, and nodded. Most of the people in the crowd would probably have heard of it anyway.

“Also, Harry has been kind enough to create a Gringotts account for me, which contains enough gold from the Black vaults to keep me happy for some time,” said Remus, almost carelessly.

The gazes swept back to Harry. Harry concealed his chuckle at the amount of shock in them. Have they not heard, or did they not take the rumor seriously? He lifted his shoulders in an elaborate shrug. “Professor Lupin has been kind to me,” he said, “and he made my childhood the richer for having known him. Of course I would wish to establish an account for him, since the Ministry is not currently enlightened enough to let him work for his keep.”

“The effects of Wolfsbane Potion,” said Snape’s voice. Harry had to bite his lip to hold back his grin. The voice was deeply cold, as though Snape were a random stranger annoyed by the introduction of another topic on the stage, rather than someone, like Harry and Lupin, adding his touch to keep the dance under their control. “You were going to discuss the effects of the Potion, Lupin.”

“So I was,” said Remus, with a smile that said he knew perfectly well who the voice belonged to. “Under the Potion, I do indeed retain my own mind, so long as I swallow it before the moon rises. I transform, but I am in control of my actions. I can run through the Forbidden Forest and prowl Hogwarts’s grounds in defense against intruders, or I can curl up in my office and sleep if I like. The Potion has given me my choices back again.” Remus’s head tilted, and Harry saw a hint of

the werewolf in his narrowing eyes and flaring nostrils. "It is a precious thing, since in so much of wizarding society I have no choices at all."

Harry raised an eyebrow. He and Remus hadn't discussed his saying that, but what good was inviting Remus to speak if he stuck to a prepared script? Harry could not, in one sense at least, speak for him, since he wasn't a werewolf. Nothing could substitute for the words of one who suffered the curse openly and was willing to speak for those who couldn't reveal themselves.

"Do you deny," said a ponderous, wheezing voice, "that werewolves have done great harm and damage to ordinary wizards and witches? Would it not be better to avoid that?"

"I do not," said Remus. "Do you deny that the wars of Light and Dark have done incredible damage to the wizarding world? Would it not be better to avoid those? Perhaps we should ban anyone from Declaring for either allegiance." His muscles were poised and sharp, on the edge of trembling. Harry saw it and wondered whether to ache for him or exult. Though this had to hurt Remus, he was at last, at least, getting the chance to speak.

"The free choice of wizards and witches has determined the nature and extent of our wars," said a far-too-cultured voice. Harry narrowed his eyes and looked, and was sure a moment later that the speaker was Mortimer Belville. "Werewolves, on the other hand—or paw, begging your pardon, Mr. Lupin—had the chance to object to the laws as they were being formed, and yet never did so."

Remus laughed. Harry heard the edge of a bark to it, and was momentarily glad that this wasn't a full moon night.

"Of course we did not," said Remus. "We were barred from making any appeals to the Wizengamot as they decided upon the laws. This was under Minister Fudge, but since it was the first of the anti-werewolf laws passed, it determined all the others. They passed with our apparent silence and complicity because we could not break that silence unless we wanted to be arrested."

“How can you possibly know that?” Belville demanded. “Those are secret Wizengamot proceedings—“

“Then how would we have had the chance to object to them?” Remus asked, with a shrug. “Answer me that, my lord.” The flat contempt in his voice made Belville’s face flush. “But I do know,” Remus added. “Conspirators should not think their secrets can remain secrets forever.”

Harry stepped in then. Remus was angry enough that he might reveal secrets that weren’t his to reveal, like the existence of Auror Wilmot, the werewolf Harry was certain had told Remus about the Wizengamot’s debate. “They should not,” he added, drawing attention back to himself. “Those ancient wizards who wove the webs to contain house elves, centaurs, unicorns, and almost every other magical species I’ve talked to didn’t pass the knowledge on to their descendants. How many of us believed that house elves were naturally servile?” He saw guilt people wouldn’t admit in most of the faces turned towards him, and nodded. “So did I, when I gave it any thought at all. But now that we know about it, we have no excuse for not acting.”

“I don’t see why,” said a witch, whose bells braided into her hair indicated she’d had war training. “We could leave things as they are. It would be the easier course.”

“And a wrong one,” said Harry quietly. “I, at least, will not leave things as they are. The reason I accepted your requests to come today is that I thought there was at least a chance you might be interested in helping me with this.”

“I still have seen very little of what you offer those who follow you,” said Cupressus Apollonis, his voice gentle and grave and utterly reasonable, “other than hardship and struggle that cannot be completed in their lifetimes. Even you, my lord Harry, young as you are, will be hard put to free all the magical species before you die. Why should we follow this path? What is in it for us?”

Harry could practically feel Ignifer’s nervousness; now that her father had made an inroad, she must be afraid that he would dominate the

conversation. But Harry had the counter to this one, given Cupressus's claimed allegiance. He smiled at him. "Sir Apollonis," he said, choosing the sarcastic title Ignifer had used, "how can you ask such a thing? The Light is fair. The Light is noble-minded. And you serve the Light. Surely you should wish to free the house elves and others because it is the right thing to do?" He cocked his head to the side and assumed a confused expression. "Of course, that is if you serve the Light. As you reminded me before the meeting, I do not know you at all. Perhaps the Dark is actually your preferred allegiance."

Cupressus's face wavered, as if a curtain were briefly pulled off a stage. The ugliness Harry saw behind the curtain made him wince. Here was an opponent who would sacrifice even his own advantage for the sake of seeing his enemies suffer. But he lifted his head and held the man's eyes. He would not back down. He had faced far greater threats than Cupressus Apollonis.

"I assure you, Harry," said Adalrico Bulstrode's voice, "that not all Dark wizards are committed to those outworn ideals that pretend to separate our two allegiances."

Harry turned to look at him, and saw the hope in his face. Adalrico wanted to be distinguished, to have those who might not know see that his family stood close to Harry's side. Well, why not? It was the truth, after all.

"I know that, Mr. Bulstrode," said Harry, bowing his head. "If you will come on stage, we can show those who might doubt us living examples of wizards who care more about actions than Declarations."

Adalrico brought his whole family, of course. Harry would not have expected less. He turned his head, seeking out and beckoning the Parkinsons, the Malfoys, and Arabella Zabini with his eyes. They came up to join him as if they'd been expecting this. Harry grinned and glanced at Acies, wondering if she wanted to be introduced as well. Acies held still for a long moment, then inclined her head so suddenly that Harry jumped.

I hope we aren't about to cost the Headmistress her Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. On the other hand, if Acies chooses to acknowledge who and what she is, I don't think McGonagall should necessarily have a say.

Harry faced the crowd again, and murmured, "May I introduce the Bulstrodes—a Dark pureblood family, sworn to me in a formal family alliance, and the lucky parents of two magical heirs." Millicent lifted her chin. Marian stood with fortunate solemnity at her mother's side. Harry knew he wasn't imagining that some of the gazes from the crowd sharpened, with envy and admiration both. He supposed he might be the instrument of the Bulstrodes getting more offers of alliance, perhaps even of marriage for Millicent, which was no bad thing. "May I introduce the Parkinsons—also a Dark pureblood family, sworn to me in a formal family alliance. Hawthorn's husband and Pansy's father, Dragonsbane Parkinson, died for me in the graveyard where Voldemort resurrected himself." He met Hawthorn's eyes, and saw more than a tinge of gratitude in them. He couldn't see Pansy's face, but she gave him a small nod.

"This is Arabella Zabini, a Songstress and an ally I am fortunate to have," said Harry, inclining his head to Arabella, who nodded back. She was beautiful in the sunlight, her black skin perhaps accented with cosmetics spells, Harry thought. He did notice that Blaise hadn't come to the stage with her. "And Acies Lestrangle, who currently teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts under the name of Acies Merryweather."

More than one gasp came from the crowd at that. Harry saw some Hogwarts students shaking their heads. They would be wondering how they hadn't recognized their professor in the cloaked woman who had ridden the dragon to stage, Harry supposed.

"And, last but far from least," said Harry, wheeling to face Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco, "the Malfoys. Lucius Malfoy has graciously entered into a truce-dance with me." Lucius nodded, his face blank, his eyes the color of steel. "Narcissa Malfoy is a large part of the reason so many other allies have gathered to me, since she is an accomplished dancer." Narcissa gave a smile like winter sunlight. "And Draco Malfoy," Harry said, meeting Draco's eyes, "my first friend

other than my brother, the first student to welcome me to Slytherin House, and—“

For a moment, he nearly faltered. Then he pushed himself forward. He could do this. He had planned to do this, to show Draco how serious he was. It was and wasn't a dramatic gesture. It would look like that to most people who weren't standing on the stage, but Draco was standing close enough to see Harry's eyes and hear the slight shake in his voice.

“And the man I currently plan to enter into a formal courting ritual with, once Walpurgis comes,” Harry finished firmly.

Draco's eyes widened, but he controlled himself almost at once. It was doubtful that even Millicent or Pansy had noticed that he hadn't expected that. He extended a hand, and after one panicked moment when he couldn't remember the correct positioning of his own hand, Harry accepted his wrist. Draco bowed his head and kissed Harry's pulse point. Harry returned the gesture the moment Draco straightened enough for him to do so.

Life to life, Harry had read about a formal public acknowledgement of the ritual. Heartbeat to heartbeat. It is a remnant of an older gesture in which both lovers were required to strip and touch their hearts to each other's, in order that their parents might check them for glours and deformities.

Harry was grateful that the kissing of pulse points had substituted for that. He held Draco's eyes for a long moment, hoping that was enough to show how much he loved him. He was willing love to show in his own eyes, but he didn't know if it worked. It wasn't an emotion he had practice expressing in that form. I can be a brother, I can be a godson and a simulacrum of a son, but I've never been a lover. I want this to work.

Draco's own eyes held his love, Harry could not doubt that, and a kind of wild, tender pride. Harry wasn't sure whether that was simply because Harry had accepted his proposal, or if the public nature of the acceptance had something to do with it.

Draco placed a hand beneath Harry's chin a moment later and draw him nearer, asking and daring him with his eyes both at once.

Harry hadn't planned beyond this moment, because he hadn't known how Draco would respond to him. But his own courage was up, and it would be stupid to back out now. He took a deep breath and leaned nearer before Draco could complete the gesture, kissing him strongly.

Draco made a little muffled sound in the back of his throat. Harry took advantage of that, and continued the kiss at a leisurely pace for several moments, then drew back and looked at Draco with a lazy smile. "And why didn't you anticipate that, hmmm?" he whispered. "Surely a Malfoy always anticipates everything."

Narcissa had something as close to an idiotic grin on her face as Harry suspected he would ever see. Lucius looked as if he couldn't decide between a smug "I knew it all along" expression and an abstracted "Let me calculate how this will affect my political fortunes" expression. And Draco...

Draco had recovered remarkably quickly. Anticipation of more and delight and affection and appreciation and possessiveness mingled in his face as he answered, "I always knew you were going to be mine, Harry. I just didn't anticipate the timing, that's all."

"Well, do keep up," Harry retorted, feeling his own grin stretch his cheeks wide, and turned to face the crowd again, Draco's arm settling around his waist.

Most of the spectators were appropriately stunned. Harry paused to savor that for a moment, then continued smoothly. "I am able, I hope, to provide my political allies with more than just the satisfaction of doing the right thing, strong as that motive is." He threw a little half-glance at Lucius, and saw people follow his gaze and realize that Lucius Malfoy, surely, would never enter into an alliance solely for "the satisfaction of doing the right thing." "But for myself, that is and will remain the strongest motive.

"I was raised in the knowledge of Dark pureblood rituals, though neither of my parents was a Dark pureblood. I have a deep love of

the wizarding world and what it has accomplished—its dances, its arts, its sports, its history. But I will love it more, allies and potential allies and friends, when its foundation of slavery and suffering has been destroyed.”

“How can you say that it is built on a foundation of suffering and slavery?” Cupressus Apollonis asked, his voice as smooth as if Harry’s public declaration of his joining hadn’t fazed him at all. “What have our dances to do with the supposed suffering of house elves? I must confess I do not see the connection.”

“Because so many of our achievements are the result of time and leisure,” said Harry, feeling passion enter his voice. He hadn’t planned to say this, at least in these exact words, but perhaps Draco’s acceptance of his acceptance had given him the courage. “Our artworks came about only because our ancestors were freed from caring for themselves by house elves.

“We pride ourselves on our fortunes. But we do not guard our own money, and we do not watch over it, and we do not mint it.” Harry fought to conceal a smile then as he thought of what would happen when the southern goblins chose to reveal their freedom. The fact that they could destabilize the currency of wizarding Britain if they chose should be a good reason for humans to listen to them. “I would argue that that does not really make our fortunes ours.

“Our dances, beautiful as they are, enshrine vengeance instead of reconciliation, pride instead of forgiveness, separation rather than a common cause. I think that is directly connected to the fact that, when wizards did encounter those who challenged their beliefs and sympathies, they responded with webs. Rather than find some way to live with them, they pushed them away. The Muggles are the only strangers we have ever encountered strong enough to overwhelm us, so instead we hide ourselves and wield our magic against them if they show any sign of intruding into our tiny world.”

“Very well said!” Harry wasn’t surprised that it was Calibrid Opalline who’d called that. Her eyes were as brilliant as her family’s blue and gold colors.

"I want to change that," Harry said, feeling fire rising and racing through him. "I want to have the beauty of our world built on a foundation of beauty. I want the façade to match what's beneath. I want to find a way to evaluate what we have built. Some traditions are worth keeping. Others are not."

"You are speaking of revolution," said Laura Gloryflower. Harry could not make out the tone in her voice, but he thought it was one of wonder.

Harry bowed his head. "I am."

"But we can't change that much!" objected Mortimer Belville, his face turning downwards in a frown. "How can we? We'll lose our identity. We're already doing that with the flood of Muggleborns into our world. We're threatened on all sides, and you want us to lower the walls?"

Harry couldn't help snorting. "We have tended to overestimate our own persecution," he said dryly. "We are the ones who placed webs on the magical creatures, not the other way around. And as for Muggleborns, Belville, I must ask you: what do you think separates a Muggleborn from a pureblood?" He could feel Draco's arm tighten around his waist, but he wasn't sure if it was in amusement or an attempt to caution him.

"Their blood," said Belville. "Their customs. Their view of the world. Their magic. Everything." There was genuine revulsion in his voice. Harry tried to conceal a wince as he thought of Hermione and John Smythe-Blyton sitting in the crowd, listening to this spew.

"I hope, in time," said Harry, "to show you that the majority of those things are pureblood perception, not reality, and the barriers that are real can be overcome." Hermione, he knew, had learned enough pureblood rituals to surprise Zacharias. He wondered what the spectators would make of her at the festival that would follow this first part of the meeting. "I know it will take time. I will not force you to give up those beliefs any more than I would force you to free house elves before you believe that they belong free. But if you wish to be part of the alliance, then you should know that I consider the rights of

Muggleborns as important as the rights of purebloods, and I will fight beside them and for them equally.”

“How can you, when you say that you were raised as a Dark pureblood?” someone he didn’t know inquired.

“A Dark pureblood with a Muggleborn mother,” said Harry, and smiled as he saw uneasy shifting in the crowd. How many of them forgot that already? It’s the behavior that matters to most of them, I would wager half my fortune, and when someone acts the part well enough, they forget about the blood. Which just goes to show how many of their prejudices are nonsense. Hard-to-overcome nonsense, I’ll grant that, but nonsense at the bottom. “I am both, in this case. And I see no contradiction in the union of those opposites. I am more interested in reconciliation than vengeance, in forgiveness than pride, in a common cause than a separation. Those I plan to leave out of this alliance are those who will exile themselves.” He caught and held the eyes of Cupressus Apollonis then. “They would not wish to work with me in any case, given what they believe.”

Cupressus’s face was a study. He had apparently believed that Harry would accept him even after he’d insulted Ignifer. Harry supposed he might have been overestimating Harry’s investment in forgiveness, or perhaps he had thought he was powerful enough that there would be no choice about it.

Harry gave him a sweet, envenomed smile. Revolution can come a little later to Ireland, that’s all. He turned away from Cupressus and said, “Understand. I intend to fight beside anyone who wishes to join me. But to do that, they must have the intention of striving for more than just the defeat of Voldemort, though that’s part of the goal for the alliance. I won’t allow this war to dominate my life, because peace is worth more than war. Prophecy supposedly marks me as the defeater of Voldemort—“ and he saw many people in the crowd lean forward “—but nothing marks me as vates but my own free will. My dedication to the same possibility in other people is what drives me forward. If I Declare for any belief, it is that one.”

He let his eyes roam the crowd for a moment, then bowed his head. “It is true that this will require work,” he said quietly. “I expect to die in

the work. By then, however, I hope to have invested enough other people with my ideals that they will continue with the revolution for its own sake.”

There. Introduce it quietly, at first—the notion of them following a set of principles, rather than a name or a person. Not all of them will accept, at first, that I don’t intend to be a substitute Dumbledore. But I’ll continue to emphasize that until they learn. This is the cause of the magical creatures and change and peace and free will and dozens of other things, not the cause of Harry.

“Does anyone have anything else to say?” he asked, into the profound silence that followed his statement.

The Antipodean Opaleye swung her head towards Harry and uttered a deafening cry. Acies translated it a moment later, in the shock of the echoes. “This Singer says that she has chosen to come because she wishes her children to escape being hunted and tormented by wizards. The vates provides the best chance for that.”

Magorian reared and then came down with his forehooves hard enough to make a distinctive thump, calling all eyes to him. “And we say that we will stand beside our vates in war, because he has freed us from both our web and the compulsion to rape that once would have followed our freedom,” he said calmly. “He pursued the road of blood and willing sacrifice in order to do so. If he can walk such a hard road, we will follow him down this broad and easy path.”

“And we will stand beside Harry because we have chosen to do so, and we honor our word.”

Hawthorn, Adalrico, and Lucius all said that at the same time. Harry refused to believe it wasn’t practiced. But it gave the necessary impression of his allies’ unity, and no one else did have any other questions or remarks after that.

Harry nodded, then lifted his hand. Magic poured forth from it and swirled lazily above everyone’s heads, then dived into the middle of the large clear area behind their seats. Harry willed and molded the

power, and it became a large dark green tent streaked with gold on the sides, the colors of his soul, or mingled Dark and Light.

“There will be festivities now,” Harry said, enjoying the shocked stares immensely. “Some of my allies have graciously agreed to provide food and drink, and others music.” He glanced at Arabella Zabini, who nodded, eyes amused. Some people would go out of their way to avoid listening to her now that they knew she was a Songstress. “I intend to wander myself. If you wish to speak to me, search me out.” He stepped gently away from Draco’s half-embrace and towards the edge of the stage.

Draco caught his left wrist. “I think we need to talk, Harry,” he said, his eyes intent.

Harry coughed, feeling his cheeks flush. “In a while, Draco,” he said, with as much dignity as he could muster. “First, I need to mingle.”

Draco nodded. “Then I’ll search you out when I want to speak to you,” he said, and smiled with a force that took Harry’s breath away, and walked towards the steps off the stage himself.

Harry shook his head dazedly, and then turned to make sure the centaurs were comfortable, trying to control the wild beating of his heart. That had not gone too badly, any of it, and it made a marvelous beginning.

Falco Parkinson took a delicate step backward, testing the strength of the magic-made tent’s roof against a sea eagle’s weight. It held. It was truly remarkable that Potter could raise a creation like this on a moment’s notice, and that the magic that made it would feel so much like cloth.

Remarkable—and unnatural.

The longer Falco observed Potter, the more he grew disturbed and unnerved at what he saw. He had known many Lords and Ladies in the past. He had watched them all Declare, and stand or fall in the wars of Light and Dark, and he had valued them even as he despised them for their weakness in having to Declare. Those Declarations

helped to balance the world. They were part of the reason that he could speak of magic, and the wizarding world he guarded, as stable. Powerful wizards and witches could divide people, split them into two equal factions, or lure the wavering and the neutral in their direction. Thus Falco had felt happy enough retreating from the world fifty years ago. Albus was a Light Lord, but he would face a wizard strong in the Dark soon enough. And he was as committed to ideals of balance and unchanging calm as someone with an allegiance could be.

Now here was a powerful wizard who refused to Declare. Falco would have been intrigued, interested in, proud of Potter if he had the sense that the boy was someone like himself—someone who had decided to remain alive as a guardian on the world's balance by tricking both Dark and Light into extending his years in the hopes that, someday, he might Declare.

But instead, Potter used both Dark and Light magic with no regard for the inner consistency and principles of either. He used the magic that fit the situation at the time. He rejected power when it grew beyond a certain limit, but never seemed to consider that, to not be a hypocrite, he really ought to give up all his magic and become a Squib. And he aspired to an impossible path, the vates, and to destroying and altering many old institutions of the wizarding world merely to suit himself.

He was a relativist. Falco had never been comfortable with them. He might do anything, and manage to justify it to himself.

And he was considering changing, altering, the whole world without a thought for what it would look like a hundred years hence.

Falco had found Tom Riddle exactly as he expected to find him: he was a Dark Lord, and good at it, maintaining one side of the balance as it should be maintained. Falco was growing increasingly concerned, however, that Harry would not Declare for Light, and that he had been able to drain so much of Tom's magic. Even nearly a month after their catastrophic encounter in the Chamber of Secrets, Tom was wounded, dazed, hurting, barely able to swallow the magic that would eventually restore his own power.

All these concerns tumbled in his mind as he sat on the tent's roof, a bird no one paid much attention to, and he saw, clearly, the path that he would have to tread if he couldn't convince Harry to Declare.

He sighed. Well, I value the balance of the world more than my own life. I always did. He raised his wings and circled down so that he could observe the people clustered in the tent. Perhaps he would yet see something that would convince him Harry was not, as he appeared, a powerful, irresponsible child.

Augustus shook his head and smiled. He did enjoy verbally sparring with Cupressus Apollonis, who could never resist the temptation to test him. They had been comrades and enemies for decades, since one was the leader of the Light families in Northern England and the other the leader of the Light families in Ireland. They believed the same things, but never approached them in the same way.

Currently, Cupressus was trying to find out—with extreme tact and politeness, of course—how Augustus had managed to get Harry to accept his alliance.

“But what was he like at his parents’ trial?” Cupressus coaxed him.

Augustus sipped at a cup of wine, which, he had to admit, was quite good even if it had come from the cellar of a Dark wizard. “He was graceful,” he responded. “Strong, like a young tree. He made a speech that still stirs tears in my eyes when I think of it, about why his parents had done what they had.”

“And you heard the details of their crimes?” Cupressus asked, his nose delicately wrinkling. “I glanced over the newspaper articles, but did not pay them much attention.” Implicit in that statement was the one that only a cretin would read the Prophet, much less give credence to what it said.

“I did,” said Augustus. “One can see the way those crimes have shaped young Harry. He tends, for example, to hate compulsion and any attempt at controlling others’ wills, though he will restrain himself for the sake of others—as if he has turned the hatred that properly

belongs to his parents' treatment of him on other wizards. And he takes a very poor opinion of feuds in families."

Cupressus's face flickered the slightest bit. Augustus hid his smile in the rim of his goblet. They had shared situations where they were matched, situations where Cupressus had the mastery, and ones like this, where Augustus held the higher ground. He liked the third kind best.

"Then he must have been upset about the rift between you and Tybalt," Cupressus murmured.

Augustus restrained his own scowl now with difficulty. He still remembered the day he had first heard of Tybalt's involvement with the Muggleborn wizard, and demanded, in a firecall, that Tybalt drop him at once, or consider himself as no longer heir of the Starrise family.

He'd received an owl the next day. Rather than an apologetic letter, it contained a copy of Tybalt and Smythe-Blyton's joining papers.

Augustus had altered his will that same afternoon. Since Pharos was also of his blood, and Tybalt hadn't been his magical heir, there had been no great barrier to doing so—except that Tybalt's stubbornness burned in the back of Augustus's mind like a hot coal.

"He was," Augustus said, recovering himself. "But he did make an attempt to reconcile us." There. Let him think how unlikely that is to happen between him and his obstinate bitch of a daughter. "And he understands the cause of the disagreement between us. He knows, for example, that Tybalt was in Gryffindor, while the rest of our family is traditionally Hufflepuff." He lowered his voice. "Meanwhile, Ignifer was raised and educated at your house alone, wasn't she, Cupressus?" He didn't need to say, aloud, that Cupressus bore the whole burden of not insuring his daughter wasn't Light through and through.

"She was," said Cupressus, his face gone smooth again. "And I should remind her of that, as she seems to have forgotten it herself.

Thank you for your time, Augustus.” He turned and melted into the crowd.

Augustus shook his head and finished his wine. He planned to retire early, after just a few more hours of watching the people circulating through the tent. Harry had said nothing unexpected in his speech, after all. And Augustus had made no progress on his own personal quest that day. The white staff had buzzed with such unhappiness he’d left it in his own tent. There was no telling whom Alba’s spirit might have meant to signal out in this mass of Dark wizards.

But tomorrow, he would bring the staff forth again. Perhaps it might sense one of her murderers, and then he could achieve vengeance for his twin at last.

Ignifer liked things to make sense. For example, the enmity between her father and herself, though encrusted with hatreds and insults and refusals to apologize on both sides, made sense at bottom, because it was a simple matter. She had Declared for the Dark after it saved her life. He had said that he would cast her out of the family and perform an infertility curse on her unless she changed her allegiance back. Ignifer had refused, her father had performed the outcasting and the curse, and that was that.

Honoriam Pemberley did not make sense. She knew that Ignifer didn’t like her much. She knew that Ignifer did not think illusions and glamours were funny. She knew that Ignifer had Declared Dark for a serious reason, not because it sounded like a good idea at the time, which seemed to be Honoriam’s whole reason for doing so. She knew that Ignifer was eleven years older than she was, and she knew that Ignifer had had no lovers, male or female, since her reversed Declaration; that had been in the gossip pages of the Rookwood, and Ignifer saw no reason to deny the truth. So Honoriam Pemberley flirting with her, fetching drinks for her, and trying to cheer her up made no sense at all.

“Go away,” Ignifer tried when Honoriam brought her a second glass of wine, because all her less direct means of dismissal, including haughty stares, had brought forth a flood of bright chatter instead.

“Why?” Honoria made a small phoenix perch on the edge of the cup and sing until Ignifer took it in embarrassment; people were starting to stare. The phoenix vanished as Honoria smiled up at her. She had done her red-gold hair up in some elaborate style that Ignifer didn’t recognize, and her blue eyes matched the shade of her robes, or at least one of their shades. She wore a glittering ton of jewelry, but Ignifer had no way of telling how much of it was real and how much an illusion. She seemed to have no idea how much of a spectacle she was making of herself. Or perhaps she did and enjoyed it, Ignifer thought. It would be like her. “I like you, and it’s not like you hate me or have anyone who would try to hex me if I pursue you.”

“It makes no sense,” said Ignifer patiently.

“Yes, it does,” said Honoria, her eyes reflecting honest surprise for a moment—unless that was a glamour, too. “You’re beautiful and intelligent and powerful and very stubborn—everything I like in a woman. Add to it that you’re fighting on the same side as I am, and I think it’s inevitable.”

Ignifer listed the reasons she’d thought of. Honoria listened to all of them, then shrugged, said, “Don’t care,” and made a small row of tap-dancing lions appear above her head, sticking their tongues out at Ignifer. Ignifer shook her head.

“Daughter.”

The voice spoke in Latin, and that alone would have made Ignifer know who it was, even without the tone. She stiffened and turned just her head to look over her shoulder. It was Cupressus, of course it was, but now Ignifer’s mother, Artemis, hovered anxiously at his side.

“Father,” Ignifer said, also in Latin. If he was going to stage a public confrontation like this, at least he’d had the grace to do it in a different language.

“I am sadly disappointed in you, daughter,” Cupressus chided her. “Why have you soiled this gathering with your presence? At least the other Dark wizards around you were misguided from birth; they knew

no other way. But you—you knew better, you had the best raising, and still you chose the path of damnation. You should depart at once, Ignifer. The stars are ashamed to look down upon you.”

Ignifer tensed her shoulders. This was no worse than many other arguments they’d had. Yes, it was in public, which made it worse inevitably, but in content and tone it wasn’t new, and she thought that if she deserved damnation for anything, it was in letting the words go to her heart still.

She knew why they did. She’d been raised knowing her place: her father’s magical heir, and future leader of the most prominent Light pureblood family in Ireland, and daughter of a magnificent legacy. And since she’d destroyed it, she’d been scrambling to find another place. She had found one with Harry, but it would never give her the security, the confidence, the absolute poise, that her father’s did him.

And that confidence always made her wonder, a tiny niggling worry, about whether she’d been wrong after all, and should go back.

“Pardon me.”

Ignifer started. She had forgotten Honoria was there. The smaller witch worked her way around between Ignifer and Cupressus now, her smile fixed and glammers of roaring lions on her shoulders.

“You are an arrogant son of shit,” Honoria told Cupressus in flawless Latin. Ignifer stared at her. Cupressus and Artemis stared at her. Honoria didn’t appear to care. “Your veins flow with it, far more than mine, Muggle mother and all. I would check your family legacy, and make sure that one of your ancestors didn’t fuck in a cesspit along the way. That’s the only thing that could explain your behavior, unless you have daily meals of shit. I wouldn’t put it past you, blind as you are.” She arched an eyebrow, and Cupressus’s face became smeared with a glamour of feces, looking—and stinking—impressively like the real thing.

She extended a hand to Ignifer, and Ignifer accepted it and let Honoria lead her away in a daze. Honoria walked until they were next

to a table full of food; then she turned and stared at Ignifer, eyes bright with concern.

“Are you all right?” she whispered in English.

Ignifer nodded. “I—thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” said Honoria, and brightened. “But I think I deserve a kiss for that, at least.”

Ignifer thought of the shit smearing her father’s face, and had to agree. She bent and lightly kissed Honoria, noting that her breath smelled of wine, and faintly of peppermint. When Honoria tried to deepen the kiss into a full-blown snog, however, Ignifer drew back with a headshake. “That was only worth one kiss,” she said. “You have to earn more.”

Honoria’s eyes lit with a passion that rivaled the glow she showed in battle. “I can do that. Do you have any siblings who listen to your father’s shit?”

“Zacharias! How nice to see you again. And who is your young lady?”

Hermione turned and dipped into a deep curtsy on seeing the witch who’d accosted her boyfriend, spreading her deep green robes around her. She knew it was the right gesture to make, because the woman was both old and in possession of a silver widow’s ring. Whether or not her family was distinguished, she deserved respect from a girl of Hermione’s age.

The witch smiled. Her eyes were brown and her hair blonde, but Hermione didn’t think she was Zacharias’s relation. He wouldn’t have been quite so haughty if he were presenting her with an aunt or cousin or great-aunt, she thought as he first bowed and then extended his hand along Hermione’s arm.

“Helena Deeping, this is my girlfriend, Hermione Granger. Hermione,” he added in a side-tone, “Mrs. Deeping is currently next in line to head the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.”

Mrs. Deeping blushed and said, "Oh, Zacharias, you make it sound as if it's going to happen next month! It might not, you know. Or the Ministry might shuffle me somewhere else. Minister Scrimgeour does give those people who might head Departments under him a most uncomfortable level of scrutiny."

"I wish you success, Mrs. Deeping," Hermione murmured, peering at the woman from beneath lowered lashes. With luck, this would turn out to be her third surprised witch of the evening. "The Light ought to favor someone who keeps to the old customs."

The witch glanced at her. "And how do you know I keep to the old customs, my dear?"

Hermione nodded to the snowflake design around the wrists of her robes, melting into twined flowers on the bottom of the sleeve. "Because you honor the seasons, ma'am. Today is the day winter becomes spring, and you've worn robes that reflect that."

Mrs. Deeping's face flushed even more with pleasure. "Miss Granger," she said, "you're a credit to your young man. I'm ashamed to say that I don't recognize your family name."

Hermione flashed a sweet smile. She loved this part. "Oh, you wouldn't, Mrs. Deeping," she said. "I'm Muggleborn."

She savored the expression of stunned surprise on Helena Deeping's face for a long moment, and then turned and swept towards the far side of the tent on Zacharias's arm.

"There's more to being a pureblood than confounding other purebloods, you know," Zacharias murmured in her ear. Hermione heard the touch of breathlessness to his voice and knew he'd been fighting to keep his laughter under control. "Besides, most of them are so unintelligent—not worthy targets of your time, my love."

"By exploding their expectations, I'm helping them ascend to our standards," Hermione said. "It's a public service. Look, there's

another one.” She nodded to a wizard in golden robes with an almost frighteningly deferential expression on his face.

“Hermione,” Zacharias sighed.

Hermione looked up at him and fluttered her eyelashes. “And it provides entertainment for you, too, love.”

Zacharias hesitated, then straightened himself with all the dignity due the Heir of Hufflepuff and the Smith family and took her to meet the wizard.

Hermione smiled for him. Really, this was gentle vengeance, and far better than drawing her wand and casting curses in all directions. She couldn’t count how many times she’d heard the word “Mudblood” since she’d been here, always spoken casually, always spoken with no sign that these wizards and witches actually knew anything about the people they were denigrating.

Hermione had spent enough time getting angry with Zacharias’s assumptions of pureblood superiority already. It was far better to get even, and show them how much better she was at their own games—and that a supposed Mudblood could learn anything, do anything, that they could.

“But it’s true,” said Thomas, wondering, as he usually did, why other people couldn’t see things that were perfectly obvious to him. This time was even stranger than usual, since he wouldn’t gain anything from telling a lie. “It’s called the Grand Unified Theory of Every Kind of Magic. Oh, some of the branches of hereditary magic are giving us a little bit of trouble, I grant you, but we’re finding exceptions in all of them, to prove that they’re not that hereditary after all, and the passage of magic is much more complicated than we ever guessed. For example, did you know that Parseltongue is only passed on from one parent in a hundred? It’s true. By tracking records of Parselmouths who had children, we found—“

“That’s all well and good,” interrupted the man Thomas was talking with. He couldn’t remember his surname, except that it was Raven-something. Thomas was far more interested in his ideas, which were

in disagreement with all of Thomas's. "But to return to your main point. Do you really mean to tell me that there is no way of predicting when and where Muggleborns will be, er, born?"

"Of course not," said Thomas, with an airy wave of his hand. "But you aren't paying attention. We've learned that there really is no difference between a pureblood's and a Muggleborn's magic. All those old ideas about children of mixed marriages being less powerful than their parents are lies, and so are the ones that say it's Muggleborns coming into the wizarding world that result in the increased birth of Squibs. We—"

"That isn't true."

Thomas frowned. The man was stupid. How funny that he hadn't noticed before! "Yes, it is," he said. "We've studied it."

"Who's we?"

"Oh, an international group," said Thomas. "I met some of the members years ago and I've been exchanging notes with them since, and then of course I got to meet them personally when we removed our children from Durmstrang. Nasty business," he added, with a shrug of his shoulders. He remembered Rose telling him some of the stories about Bellatrix Lestrange, whose cruelty was not only repetitive but stupid, and for a moment he lost the thread of the conversation. Then he shook his head and came back to it. His children were rescued now, and everything had worked out all right. "We owe Harry a great deal for rescuing our families—"

"Then you really call him Harry," said Raven-missing-syllables, looking at him with increased attention. "I thought that was only a political stunt, for him to have abandoned his last name, and that you called him Lord Potter among yourselves."

"Why would we?" Thomas asked in bewilderment. Really, he is rather stupid. "Harry is his name."

Raven-whatever chuckled and leaned nearer to him. "You can tell me the truth, Mr. Rhangnara," he coaxed, his voice gentle. "I mean,

we've all heard the stories, and they're good stories, but don't you think it's just a bit unbelievable that a boy who's not even out of school yet did all that? I've heard he has a friend at the Prophet, that Skeeter woman, who'll alter stories for him as it suits him. And, likewise, you can tell me what really happened at Durmstrang. It might help me make the decision on whether to join the alliance. A boy who disclaims his last name and speaks nonsense about wanting to help house elves isn't an attractive proposition, but if I knew that he had a circle of advisers around him, sensible adults, who know and speak the truth and are just letting him run on his rein right now to play out his wilder excesses—"

"You'll have to find one of them elsewhere, then," Thomas interrupted. Now he understood what was going on, and he was irritated. It was no wonder that Raven-rest-of-name was overly invested in the idea that there were fundamental differences between purebloods and Muggleborns, no matter what the evidence said. He was an idiot altogether. "Because Harry did rescue my children, and he is what he says, and the freeing of house elves is, at the very least, an interesting philosophical question that ought to be attended to with interest by anyone not utterly blinded by his own pride. Good night, sir."

Thomas turned and stormed off towards the nearest table of food, where he could see three of his children talking with some of the other young wizards in attendance. He huffed under his breath. Why were so many people having trouble accepting that Harry was vates? It wasn't a matter of picking a side and closing one's eyes. It was a matter of looking at the evidence and seeing what actually worked, what was actually true.

Then the crowd shifted, and he caught a glimpse of Harry talking to a centaur, and he smiled, his bad mood forgotten almost at once.

In the end, evidence and truth would win out, because they had to. And Thomas got to watch a real vates at work. He relaxed and walked forward, whistling, his native optimism restored. The ignorant couldn't be ignorant for long, surely, when truth shouted at them from every corner of the world.

And perhaps Harry and the centaur wouldn't mind if he listened in on their conversation, for research purposes. So far, most of the centaurs their research group had contacted had proven reluctant to let wizards interview them for information on their magic.

Millicent turned her head abruptly. She thought she'd just felt a familiar flare of magic at her shoulder, as if someone she knew was standing there. But no, though she'd been startled, what had startled her was someone passing drenched in an uncomfortable amount of perfume. Millicent winced, imagining what that would be like for the werewolves in the group, and started to face her food again. She was sitting down, because only the gauche would eat while walking around.

"Miss Bulstrode?"

Millicent looked up. Next to her was a boy she didn't recognize, standing slightly taller than she was only because of the chair. He bowed to her, as if he wanted to apologize for interrupting her meal. Millicent leaned back and studied him. He must be from Beauxbatons, she thought, because his English, though almost perfect, did have a slight French accent to it, and he looked as if he'd been in the sun far more often than Durmstrang would permit.

Millicent was sure that she would have remembered him if he attended Hogwarts. His eyes were piercing green, almost the color of Harry's, and he was her age.

"Yes?" she asked, since she realized the boy was patiently permitting her to look at him, and that meant he wasn't here for just a quick conversation.

"My name is Pierre Delacour." He gave her a slightly self-deprecating smile as her eyebrows rose. "Yes, my cousin Fleur attended the Triwizard Tournament at Hogwarts," he confirmed. "And my family is at this meeting partly because of Fleur's reports of Harry's power." He cocked his head like a curious bird. "But since Harry's speech, I have found myself more interested in you personally, Miss Bulstrode."

Millicent felt her lips curve in a smile. This sounded like the first stages of either an alliance or a marriage offer, and she was fully prepared to accept either one.

"I am flattered, Mr. Delacour," she said, standing. "Would you like to meet my parents, so that yours might talk with them?"

"It would be a delight," said Pierre gravely, and claimed her hand. "But, not just at the moment, no. My first business is with you, Miss Bulstrode."

A marriage offer, then. Millicent wondered how many others would be started or even concluded tonight, and whether Harry knew what purpose the alliance meeting would serve. Probably. It was not often that this many European wizards and witches came together, and they would take chances to conduct negotiations that might otherwise happen only in small festivities.

"I'm flattered, Mr. Delacour," she said, and offered him her arm. From one corner of her eye, she caught her father's delighted grin. "Shall we walk?"

"Look at him," Regulus whispered into Snape's ear, with a slight chuckle. "If I was choosing my heir on the basis of political acumen, I could hardly do better."

Snape had to admit that Harry was steering himself well through the crowd. He spoke to most of the people who came up to talk to him, his face friendly and open enough. In about half the conversations, it wound up closing, and he shook his head gravely and stepped away. It needed nothing more than that to let his listeners know that he didn't find their terms, whatever they were, acceptable.

Snape did think that the unassuming posture Harry had chosen here, eschewing his own tent and colors, and even formal robes—he wore his Hogwarts ones—went a little too far. And it was contradicted by the fact that he'd stood up in front of them all and made a speech, with a dragon blazing at his side and his allies gathered around him and Lupin practically declaring war on the Ministry.

And then the public kiss with Draco...

Snape frowned and shook his head. It was not that he disapproved of Draco's courting ritual—it would take both of them being different people before Snape would think Harry should marry or join with someone else—but it also struck against the humility that Harry affected, and made it seem more of an affectation. He could say what he liked about being a Dark pureblood with a Muggleborn mother. More of his gestures, trappings, and actions spoke "Dark pureblood" than the other way around.

He is a Lord, in the eyes of most of the people here. Far be it from me to press the title or the Declaration on him, but he should realize that he seems to be making himself into a Lord even without either.

"You're too quiet tonight, Severus," said Regulus, dragging him out of his thoughts. "You should dance."

Snape gave him a sharp look and shifted his right leg, which was sore enough from the short walk from the seats to the tent. "And how would you suggest that I do that, Black?" he asked. "Perhaps you intend for me to set a new fashion for unspooling one's flesh on the dance floor?"

Regulus laughed at him. Snape reluctantly smirked. Regulus had always been able to pull him into amusement, as regularly and inexplicably as Sirius Black could infuriate him.

"Your leg wouldn't come undone," said Regulus. "Madam Pomfrey fixed it up too well. Come on!" He grabbed Snape's left arm, pointedly resting one hand on the concealed Dark Mark, and tugged him off his seat. A wave of his wand, held in his other hand, and music began to play from nowhere, a slow, sedate piece that would allow Snape to dance, if he really wished to, without hurting his leg.

Snape, of course, scowled and refused to at first. Regulus capered by himself, and attracted attention, and looked so utterly ridiculous that Snape finally began, reluctantly, to move, if only to save his friend from the embarrassment of dancing alone.

“There,” said Regulus. “I knew you had it in you! You certainly dance enough in your mind, making up enough clever insults for any ten wizards.”

“You forget which one of us dances better, my friend,” Snape murmured, and kept his eyes fixed on Regulus’s face.

Regulus’s expression faltered for just a moment, and he jerked his head up, his nostrils flaring. Then he said, “Well, but some dances are just unpleasant to recall, Severus. Clumsy partners, stepping on one’s feet, reversing direction while the music’s still playing and forgetting what one does in the formal waltzes. And Voldemort had a particular predilection for clumsy partners, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know,” said Snape thoughtfully, as he moved in a slow circle. “He had me. And Peter. And Lucius. And Hawthorn. And you,” he added.

“Ah,” said Regulus, voice pitched low. “I’ll grant you your own mastery. And Lucius, his too. I think he was responsible for some of the deaths you believed Evan orchestrated. And none of us even suspected that Peter was a devotee to the Light, and not just jealous of my brother and his friends. And Hawthorn, well, the way she maneuvered to make sure her husband wouldn’t have to serve her Lord was wonderful.” Regulus spread his arms and adopted a big, goofy grin. “But me? Severus, I couldn’t even maneuver Harry into becoming my heir. How am I supposed to have been a good enough intriguer to weave elaborate plots among the Death Eaters?”

“And yet, here Harry is, your heir,” said Snape. “And here you are, alive.”

“After having spent fourteen years as a wooden dog,” said Regulus. “Poor Severus, if that’s your definition of triumph.”

“We take our victories where we can find them,” said Snape. “And we make out own defeats, half the time. I still allow a prank that occurred in my sixth year to bother me.” A month ago, he could not have said that. But then, a month ago, he could not have seen himself considering suicide for any other reason than to escape his own pain.

“And you still act as if you carry a secret Harry would find it too hard to forgive you for.”

Regulus tossed his head, a nervous gesture, like a half-bridled horse. His gray eyes shone with a light Snape remembered well. “I told him about the trapped Mark, Severus.”

“Not that. What you kept from all of us for a year, Regulus. Or was it two? How early did you know what the Dark Lord tried to kill you for?”

Regulus’s hands clenched and opened. “Long enough to do certain things because of it—things I’m ashamed of now.”

“Things that Harry could forgive you for,” said Snape. “If you could overcome your own shame.”

“It’s not that easy—“

“It wasn’t for your brother, either,” Snape said, and stamped with his left foot when the music called for it. “Voldemort used his own shame to strangle him, and keep him from telling anyone of it until it was too late.”

“I’m very sure that Voldemort’s not possessing me,” said Regulus, and tried to recover with another grin. “He’d object to some of what I put my body through.”

“Not as much as Harry would object to your death,” Snape said, and waited.

It was the end of the dance, in more ways than one. Regulus drew back with a shake of his head, and whispered, “And what if my shames and my crimes are multiple, Severus?” and turned back to his seat.

Snape went to watch Harry’s back. He’d been mingling with the crowd unguarded for long enough now. And Regulus needed time to think and realize that people could forgive him, even for things that he himself considered unforgivable.

Regulus had once been the only person Snape considered worthy of his time among the Death Eaters. Then he had been more than that, and deeper. He had come back changed, but unchanged in what was at once his most endearing and his most irritating trait: his conviction that he needed to do things himself, because that was the only way he could measure up to the standards of the people around him.

Harry grimaced and nodded. "Yes. That was a mistake, and I shouldn't have allowed it." He glanced ruefully at the half-empty tables of food, and the more-than-half-empty table of wine and goblets. "I'm going to take care of that in the future."

"Good," said Magorian, with a grave scrape of his hoof. "We did wonder, vates, whether you noticed the irony in allowing house elves to provide food for you and your allies."

Harry knew he was blushing, but he grinned at the centaur. "That's one thing centaurs will do that almost no wizards will: keep me honest."

"It is our honor, vates."

Magorian and the other centaurs took their leave then; Harry suspected it came at least partly from people starting to drift up to them, having overcome their fear, and ask them impertinent questions. He watched them thunder away, and returned Magorian's backwards-glancing salute with a sharp nod. Then he took a deep breath to try and still his nervous excitement. Magorian had given him, in amongst all the other things they'd talked about, two pieces of extremely good news: Firenze's mission to the giants was going well, the last his friends had heard of it.

And the centaurs were ready to join in the trap Harry intended to lure Voldemort into on Midsummer.

Harry saw the other wizards, frustrated by the centaurs' sudden departure, turn towards him. He pasted a smile on his face. He could control his expression when he felt no emotion stronger than frustration. He was tired—it was well after nine o'clock now, and he hadn't had anything to eat, what with the constant talking. But he had

secured several new people to the alliance, and dismissed many others, and he had the chance to do more. Frustration could wait.

Besides, he wasn't sure he should eat the food when house elves had provided it. It was time to start paying closer attention to his morals.

"Mr.—I mean, sorry, Harry?"

Harry smiled at the first young wizard who'd forced his way forward. He was drenched in perfume, as if he feared to offend with the least scent of sweat. Something about his movements was familiar, but Harry didn't know what it was. From his bright blue eyes, he could be related to a quarter of the pureblood families here. Harry had probably met and talked with his relatives already.

"Yes?" he asked. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

The young man bobbed nervously. "I know. Sorry. My name's Alan Morningturn. I just wanted to tell you that I'd—I mean, if you're serious, I don't know if you were—I'd like to free my house elves."

Harry blinked. "You are? You would?" That was the first such offer all evening, and he could feel his heartbeat speeding up in anticipation and the miasma of weariness and frustration falling away. "That would be wonderful. I am serious. Do you have a formal contract to give me permission to free the house elves?" Though the wizard's word was probably enough, he'd like something written. That way, if Alan was offering a gift he couldn't deliver on, like house elves who belonged to a relative, Harry could make sure to refuse.

"Yes. Right here." Alan's face was pink with excitement as he fumbled in his robe pocket. "Oh, Merlin, this is so exciting, thank you, thank you, thank you—"

Harry wasn't sure afterwards what warned him. Perhaps it was as slight as the indentation of Alan's robe pocket around something that definitely wasn't a sheaf of parchment. Perhaps the boy's practiced nervous expression faltered at the last moment. Or perhaps he

remembered, suddenly, where he'd seen those familiar gestures before.

He was on the ground before Alan pointed his wand and screamed, "Avada Kedavra!"

Harry rolled safely away from the jet of green light, which had been aimed so directly at him that it struck the earth instead of flying over his head, and he didn't have to worry about anyone else. In a moment, he was on his feet, his hand snapping out and drawing tight. In his mind, he chanted, *Expelliarmus. Petrificus Totalus.*

Alan's wand flew out of his hand, his body went rigid, and he fell to the ground, his eyes rolling back in his head. Harry took a deep breath and scrambled to one knee, whispering, "*Finite Incantatem.*"

But the glamour, if glamour it was, remained on Alan's face. Harry murmured a charm to turn his robe pockets inside out, and found no flask of Polyjuice Potion. He frowned at Alan, wondering who he was, and how he could have managed a spell that Harry's magic wouldn't expose.

One suspicion he could allay, however. At his gesture, Alan's left robe sleeve rose. Harry let out a harsh breath at the sight of the Dark Mark gleaming on his flesh.

"Harry!"

Draco's arms were around him in the next moment. Harry reached back to pat him absently on the shoulder, staring still at Alan, trying to figure out his deception. Alan stared back, his frozen eyes wild with rage and fear.

That expression was familiar to Harry, at least. He had to transport it into another face and into eyes that weren't that shade of blue before he could make the connection, though.

And in the end, it was Snape, limping up to them just then, who spoke the name aloud. "Montague!" he barked, the name of the one

Slytherin Death Eater, who had vanished from Hogwarts on the same night as Rovenan had died.

Harry winced as he saw the expression in "Alan's" eyes change. "What's been done to him, sir?" he asked, raising his voice and stepping gently away from Draco. He appreciated the support, but he needed to stand upright. Otherwise, rumors that Montague had managed to wound him might circulate.

"A permanent change to his face and voice," Snape murmured, leaning forward. "Very powerful and Dark magic. It can't be reversed, so it's rarely used. But the Dark Lord did force such a change on a few of his followers in the First War." He glanced at Harry, ignoring the wake of shrieks and gasps and horrified gestures spreading behind them. "I recognize him as Montague, but we'll need to use Veritaserum on him to be sure."

Harry hesitated. Technically, only the Ministry had the legal authority to use Veritaserum. And while he could be said to be the authority in this gathering, since he was both its host and the most powerful wizard, he wasn't entirely sure what would happen if word of this got back to Scrimgeour.

Even more, though, he did not dare to look afraid. He doubted that Montague would confess to his crime. He could claim that he was Alan Morningturn to anyone who asked, and here by Harry's own invitation. And if he said that Voldemort had compelled him to do this, then Harry would have to accept it, since he had accepted that the victims of Dumbledore's spell were compelled to horrible crimes against him. They could use Legilimency, but that was even more invasive, definitely illegal, and not something that Harry wanted to reveal he, Snape, or Charles could do.

He nodded, once. He would make the decision, and if consequences followed it, then he would deal with them. "Veritaserum it is," he said.

Snape pulled a vial of the clear liquid from his pocket, uncapped it, and moved his fingers towards Montague's face. Harry relaxed the Body-Bind just enough for Montague's jaw to open and Snape to place the three drops on his tongue. Montague gave a gagging sound.

Snape, his face full of quiet, contained rage, massaged his throat to make sure he swallowed.

“What is your full name?” Harry asked, as the test question.

“William Richard Montague,” said Montague, his voice flat and his eyes glazed.

Harry nodded. He had expected this, he told himself. There was no reason to feel as if a cold wind were blowing down his spine, as if it had really taken him by surprise that Montague had tried to assassinate him. He had known the other boy was a Death Eater.

“What was your purpose in coming here today?” he asked.

This time, Montague fought to hold the answer back, but it emerged anyway. “To kill you if I could,” he said. “Our Lord is so weak that I wanted vengeance.”

“So you didn’t come at Voldemort’s command?”

“No,” Montague grunted, biting his own tongue as he struggled. “I’m supposed to be out recruiting other Death Eaters. Most of the Death Eaters are.”

Harry smiled. He knew it wasn’t a pleasant smile. “I suspect we’ll treat you a damn sight better than Voldemort will for trying this and failing,” he muttered. “Was your plan really just to come up and try the Killing Curse on me?”

“Yes,” said Montague, his eyes on the ground now. Harry didn’t think he was unable to meet his victim’s gaze. It was Snape’s that seemed to disturb him. “I thought if I could get close enough, I had at least a chance. And there’s no saying that you can resist the Killing Curse a second time.” He did glare at Harry then, as if challenging him to say that he could.

Harry shrugged, and looked at Snape. “Can you think of other questions to ask him before I turn him over to the Ministry?”

“Are there any other Death Eaters here today?” Snape’s voice was low and merciless.

Montague sneered, looking, for no reason Harry could fathom, triumphant. “Yes.”

Harry understood a moment later. Of course, there were other Death Eaters here today, or those who had once been Death Eaters: Peter, Regulus, Lucius, Adalrico, Hawthorn, and Snape.

But Snape swung around, drawing his wand as he moved, using his bad leg as a pivot. His voice was equally low and merciless as he cast the spell, and Harry could feel his magic surging up behind the incantation, to insure it touched everyone in sight. “Abscindo manulaes laevaes!”

Every robe in sight lost its left sleeve. Harry could hear cries of outrage, and sighed. Of course, some of his new allies, touchy already, would consider this the ultimate insult, to be suspected of following Voldemort when Harry had invited them to a peaceful gathering and made them swear an oath not to use magic except in self-defense.

Harry could see people looking at their neighbors’ bare left arms as if expecting a revelation. He shook his head when long moments passed and there was no reaction more extreme than some of their watchers flinching at the sight of Snape’s bared Dark Mark. “I think we should—”

A hoarse cry sounded abruptly behind them. Harry whipped around, and saw Mortimer Belville dragging someone forward. He cast the other wizard on the ground in front of Harry with a triumphant shout that was almost a bark.

The man was Edward Burke, and he had one hand on his left arm, trying to cover something up. Harry narrowed his eyes when he saw the curve of the black snake and skull sticking out from under his fingers, and his heart gave a single, harsh jump.

"Did you betray us to Voldemort during the Woodhouse battle?" he whispered.

"You know nothing," Burke hissed, his eyes wild. He tried to back up, and failed as Belville's wand poked him in the back. The next moment, he'd whirled around and snapped at Belville, "Yes, I was a traitor, if you want to call it that, and he helped me!"

Harry looked at Belville. He raised one eyebrow and turned his left arm towards Harry, showing him the unmarked flesh.

"You did!" spat Burke. "You did, you bastard! You told me that you were going to be Marked!"

Belville gave a short, helpless laugh and shook his head. "I was joking, Burke. I thought we were having a drinking and complaining session about Potter, back when he was still Potter, yes? And here I find out that you took me seriously." He clasped one hand to his face. "My apologies, Harry," he added, from between his fingers. "I never thought he was serious, or I would have suggested that you look for the Mark on his arm sooner."

Burke uttered a short, wordless scream and tried to climb from the ground to attack him, but Snape's wand flicked, and he was still. In a Body-Bind, Harry thought, until he squinted, and saw Burke twitching with small, swift jolts of pain traveling through him.

"Sir!" he hissed at his guardian.

Snape converted the spell to an ordinary Body-Bind without a word, but the expression on his face was fixed, and he never took his eyes off Burke. Harry sighed and stared at his ally for a moment. He could guess why the old wizard had done this, but it would be good to have confirmation.

"Why?" he asked, and gestured for Snape to relax the spell on his jaw.

Burke was more than anxious to tell him, it seemed, perhaps because his cover had been blown and this was the only chance to air his

grievances he would ever have. "Because you're tainting the Black bloodline," he said, staring at Harry as if he could bore holes in him with his eyes. "Because you're going to bring Mudbloods into our world and this alliance, and you act as if you don't understand what a—a blasphemy that is! Because you just had to resurrect the Black heir, and then become his heir! Because you're going to corrupt us and tear us, rend us and shred us, and cause our deaths at the hands of the Muggles!" His hands twitched as if he could break the Body-Bind and grope at the air. "At least His Lordship has the right idea about keeping our worlds separate! I bear his Mark with pride, and he was good enough to accept me, even though two heirs of my bloodline betrayed him and should have tainted it in his eyes!"

Harry concealed a sigh. Perhaps he should have thought twice about becoming Black heir, but that wouldn't have stopped him from bringing Regulus back, and he had had no idea that Burke felt this deeply about Harry's becoming heir. "And that was really all of it?" he asked softly.

"I thought I'd give you a chance to prove that you respected me," said Burke. He spoke so violently that spit flew with his words, and Belville moved a step away to stop the saliva from getting on his robes, face twisting in disgust. "I made contributions to the meetings. But you ignored them, and you never looked at me for more than a few seconds. You overlooked me, in your eagerness to let your pet Mudbloods and werewolves and Light wizards have a say. I refused the Dark Mark, at first. I didn't tell my Lord everything. I wanted to keep my options open. It was a test. And you proved that you didn't care. You granted my relatives more respect than you ever granted me."

Harry controlled his breathing with an effort. Burke's confession opened its own set of problems to him. He could feel eyes boring into him, resting on him. And no matter what he did, someone would account it the wrong decision.

If he drained Burke of his magic, it would frighten some of the people here. If he killed him, it would frighten them even more badly, and he could wind up being charged with murder by the Ministry. Dosing Montague with Veritaserum was pushing as it was. If he simply

turned Montague and Burke over to the Ministry, then some people would think he was too lenient.

So, since he could not please everyone, he might as well please himself.

“Mr. Rhangnara,” he called, raising his voice.

Thomas hurried through the crowd a moment later, his face flushed with something that might have been excitement. He was such an optimist that Harry could see him treating this as an opportunity for observing traitors as a sub-species of wizards. “Yes, Harry?” he asked breathlessly.

“Would your wife be willing to take charge of Montague and Burke?” Harry asked. Priscilla Burke wasn’t here; since she was the Head Auror, attending this meeting might have sent the signal to Scrimgeour that she had greater allegiance to Harry than to him. But she had proved useful after the Woodhouse battle, taking charge of the captured Death Eaters after Harry and his allies had left. She might prove useful now.

Thomas beamed. “She would like nothing better. I’ll Apparate with them to the Ministry, if you’d like.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll give you their wands.” A flick of his hand sealed Montague’s and Burke’s jaws again. “If they need additional proof of their crimes—though the Dark Marks should be enough, really—then I can provide that.”

“It sounds like enough to start with,” said Thomas, and smiled at the two Death Eaters. It wasn’t a pleasant smile. Harry shook his head as Thomas floated the bound Burke into the air. He wasn’t going to be as easy with them as Harry had thought. Well, he had saved the man’s children from Durmstrang. Perhaps he was less sympathetic to Harry’s enemies as a consequence.

He turned back to the people staring at him, some of them clutching at their ruined robes. Belville was examining his missing left sleeve with a mournful air.

"I use justice when I can," he said, raising his voice again. "I won't kill them, because they haven't hurt me, though not for lack of trying." His mind flashed back to Fergus Opalline, who had died in the attack on Woodhouse, and he wondered if Paton would claim justice on Burke for that. There was no direct proof that Burke's information had led to Fergus's death yet, though. "I do try to offer justice, and not vengeance, to my enemies. I try not to act hastily." He took a deep breath and met pair after pair of eyes. "That doesn't mean I won't strike quickly if you battle me, or come after someone under my protection."

Reluctantly, he dropped the barriers on his magic for the first time. Most people here would have been able to feel that he was powerful, but not how much; Harry had been holding back so as not to intimidate them into allying with him. But now, it was necessary to show strength, so he would counter any unfortunate perceptions that mercy was weakness.

The chatter went silent as waves of magic washed through the tent. Harry blinked as he saw the walls of the tent briefly start to lose their form, and stabilized them. Then he shook his head when he saw how many of the watching eyes had gone wide.

"I don't enjoy having to do that," he said quietly, and raised his barriers, and went off to be by himself for a while, and think. Draco spoke his name quietly. The last thing he wanted to do was startle a jumpy Lord-level wizard who was brooding on what he would consider his latest failure.

"Harry?"

Harry turned his head and nodded, which Draco took as permission to approach more closely. He sat down next to Harry, who'd taken a seat on the stone steps of the stage and tilted his head back to watch the slender sliver of moon rise among the stars. It was a wonderfully clear night, though still cold enough to require warming charms. Draco could see lights coming from Lumos spells cast inside the tent, and the tent's walls themselves, which glowed softly where golden

streaks marked the deep green cloth. A softer radiance seemed to shine from inside the Antipodean Opaleye, who was curled, a glowing diamond heap, not far from the stage.

“Why did you leave?” Draco asked at last, even though he thought he knew. At least it would get Harry talking. He’d sat for ten minutes in silence already, and it was getting on Draco’s nerves.

Harry shrugged. “Thinking on what I could have done differently,” he said. “I’m not good company when I’m like that. And, well, all anyone would have wanted to talk about were Burke and Montague. I didn’t want to discuss them.”

Draco snorted. I know why he thinks like this, but honestly, it’s ridiculous. “Of course they would want to talk about it, Harry! One of them just tried to kill you, and the other admitted to being a traitor to your cause.”

Harry shrugged again. Draco stifled the impulse to hit him, or to argue that Harry should have killed Burke and Montague instead of letting them go to the Ministry. There were people here who would be horrified that Harry had killed in cold blood, and some of them might be wizards Harry would need in the future. And Harry wasn’t the kind of person to respond to lethal force with lethal force, more was the pity, or he could have slain Montague in the moments after he cast the Killing Curse—Draco would have done that—and then they could have searched his body and found the Dark Mark. Draco supposed the information they’d acquired from him was valuable, but he’d be dead.

And Burke would still be hidden.

Draco stifled a sigh this time. Perhaps there wasn’t an answer for that, after all.

“Well,” he said, forcing lightness into his voice. “I didn’t come to talk about them.”

Some of the tension melted from Harry’s shoulders. “About what, then?”

Draco snorted. "Oh, you know very well, Harry," he said. "You accepted the courting ritual in public today. You kissed me in public. You acted as though we were acknowledged partners already, which I didn't have any idea you were thinking about." He felt the exhilaration that had gripped his heart like claws then, along with the exasperation. He would have enjoyed a moment like this in private beforehand. Harry could have told him what he planned, and Draco would have still played the part of stunned and thrilled boyfriend to perfection. "Why?"

Harry turned to face him. "Because I did want other people to see that you're important to me, Draco," he said. "Because I want anyone who thinks to offer me marriage or joining to see that I'm already claimed." Draco was fairly sure he would have gibbered if he opened his mouth then, so he kept it shut. "Because, just maybe," Harry added, a faint smile playing around the corners of his lips, "you looked so fetching in your dark blue robes that I couldn't resist."

"Prat," said Draco, but without much heat. "You planned that."

Harry nodded.

"But it wasn't just a political stunt?" Draco pursued. "You do mean to accept my courting when it starts on Walpurgis Night?"

Harry blinked, then hissed, "Idiot! Would I do something like that if I didn't mean it? You know me better than that!" He shoved Draco's shoulder, hard enough that Draco could tell there was genuine anger behind the motion.

Draco reached out and caught both his hand and his left wrist. "That was all I wanted to know," he murmured. "I did think that, Harry, but when you avoided me all afternoon—"

"I did not avoid you all afternoon! Other people got in my way all evening and wanted to talk about other things—"

"But now we're alone," Draco said, pitching his voice deliberately low, "and other people aren't here to talk about other things. So, Harry."

He leaned closer. "When joined partners and marriage partners are acknowledged, they're perfectly free to touch each other, you know, even when the ritual isn't complete yet."

Harry flushed. Draco marveled that he could have such courage in front of a crowd and not now. Of course, there, Draco thought, he's conscious of dozens of different pairs of eyes dividing consideration of him with other people. Here, I'm the only one focusing on him, and he does seem to have a problem with that.

Draco didn't intend to let that deter him, though, not when Harry hadn't let other people deter him from the kiss in public today. He leaned nearer still, lifted a hand to slip it behind Harry's neck, and brought him closer.

Harry initiated the kiss with an awkward lunge, as if to prove that he wasn't afraid, but Draco was the first to open his mouth. Harry made a soft sound in the back of his throat, startled. He was relaxed enough to yield, however, and Draco gently pressed him backward onto the step they sat on, pooling Harry's robes beneath him. Harry was far enough gone that he didn't seem to notice Draco removing his robes, but he definitely noticed when Draco slid a hand beneath his shirt. Draco sat up and looked down at him. Harry, his breath rushing in a mixture of panic and pleasure, held his eyes.

"Well?" Draco whispered.

Harry swallowed. "Go ahead," he said, and lifted his head and opened his mouth in invitation for another kiss.

Draco obliged, and obliged himself, at least, by unbuttoning Harry's shirt. Harry was flushed all down his chest, too, making his skin an odd color in the yellow-green light of the Lumos charm from Draco's wand. Draco moved his mouth gently from Harry's mouth to his neck, and then down towards his chest.

Harry was gasping, and then he seemed to decide this wasn't fair, and murmured a charm Draco couldn't make out. In an instant, his own dark blue robes were folded neatly beside them, and then Harry was unbuttoning his shirt with fingers and magic made clumsy by

haste and, Draco thought, looking into his clouded eyes again, by arousal.

Draco lay down gently beside Harry, and closed his eyes as Harry skated nervous fingers over his chest, and then leaned forward and placed something that was half-kiss, half-bite on his collarbone. Draco groaned, and had the thought, only relevant in another time and place, that his father would be mortified to hear that sound coming from a Malfoy. His impatience danced and strained at its leash, and he wanted to roll on top of Harry, uncomfortable as that might be with both of them on a stone step. Merlin, he felt so good, and the cold air had vanished, they might have been bathed in sunlight, and he reached for Harry again—

Harry shuddered, and gasped, and then gave a sharp cry that woke Draco from his daze at once, because that was a cry of fear, not of pleasure. “Harry?” he asked. He was talking to Harry’s shoulder, though, because he’d rolled away.

“I’m all right,” Harry whispered into his hand. “Really. Just—a little too far, that’s all.” His voice was shaky, but it gained steadiness quickly. He rolled over again and smiled at Draco. “I can see why you have a hard time waiting,” he murmured. “And yes, I’ll accept the courting ritual on Walpurgis Night, and—and everything that comes with it.” He lifted his chin as if daring his mother to appear out of the night and tell him that no, he couldn’t have this.

Draco’s body boiled and churned with impatience and pleasure, and he wished that Lily Potter was there, too, so he could kill her for having trained Harry the way she had. But they had come further this time before Harry felt too good to continue. He’d have what he wanted, they’d have what they wanted, sooner or later.

He was about to say something like that when a strange noise erupted from beside him. He raised his eyebrows. “What’s that?”

“Um,” said Harry. “While I was talking to other people about other things, I might possibly have forgotten to eat anything.” His stomach rumbled again, to confirm this.

Draco was relieved to have an excuse to claim Harry was a prat, an absolute idiot, and needed a minder almost as much as he needed a boyfriend, while they both put on their shirts and their robes again. It slid him past the moment when he had the instinct to just watch Harry, and his flushed cheeks, and his hair which was sticking in several directions, and grin like a fool.

I'm not a fool, I'm a Malfoy. But I think I can be excused, just this once. Harry is going to join with me, and share a bed with me. The second sooner than the first, in fact. That bit of advice about waiting until the joining ritual is complete is sheer and utter nonsense, and Malfoys don't need to listen to it.

Chapter Seventy-Three: The Teeth of the Past

Harry wasn't surprised to wake the next morning and find half the tents dismantled. Enough wizards and witches had spoken to him yesterday as should leave them in no doubt of his politics. Some were still lingering in hopes they could change their minds or his, but most of the hopeless cases were gone now.

That still left almost three hundred people in the valley, though. Harry shook his head, smiling. He wondered how many of them actually meant to swear an alliance with him, and how many were hoping they could drag him into a compromise of some kind.

"Harry! You shouldn't be out here alone!"

Harry turned, startled, and then laughed as he saw his brother emerging, hair mussed with sleep, from his golden-white tent, which Harry was passing on his way towards the Malfoy one. "Connor! I don't think anyone else is going to attack me, not after the way I handled Montague."

Connor tried to respond, but wound up yawning. "Wait here," he said, ducking into the tent again. "I'll get you an escort. Fred and George are already awake."

Harry rolled his eyes at the thought of actually taking two Weasleys to breakfast with the Malfoys, but Connor was insistent, and Fred and George would only follow if Harry didn't walk beside them. Harry had no desire to have the twins and their inventions chasing him, perhaps calling his name in various embarrassing ways. An escort would work.

Fred and George tumbled out a few moments later, yawning so widely that Harry started to think Connor's idea of them being awake was exaggerated. But they recovered in a moment, and focused on him with identical grins that reminded Harry of the way cats looked at mice—if cats baited mice with the smell of cheese and sent them back to lure out the rest of the nest.

"Where are we going to have breakfast, O Great and Grand Lord of Light and Dark?" the one Harry thought was George asked.

Harry sighed. "With the Malfoys. But you don't have to stay with me. You can just take me to the tent, and—"

"Oh, no," said the other twin, probably Fred. "After all, we're the brothers of the best friend of your brother, and Draco's your consort now." The other twin sniggered. "That makes the Malfoys practically our in-laws," Fred finished innocently, and Harry choked.

"Please don't mention that in front of them," he begged when he'd recovered his breath.

"We won't," George agreed. "We'll save it—"

"For the joining," said Fred, looking delighted. "Then we can photograph them as they—"

"Choke on the cake," George finished, nodding emphatically. "Can you imagine it, Fred?" The twins exchanged dreamy smiles.

Harry bit down on the instinct to protest. The sooner this started, the sooner it would be over with. "Come on, then," he said in resignation, and led the way towards the Malfoy tent. It was a beautiful morning, the sun blazing off the dew that coated the grass and mud, but he no longer took as much cheer in that as he had a few moments ago. Lucius Malfoy had always disliked Weasleys.

It had to do with their pure blood and their refusal to have any standards. It had to do with personal insults that Arthur Weasley had offered him. It had to do with a feud that extended backwards between their two families into decades where Weasleys had certainly committed crimes and Malfoys might, just might, have retaliated with the good taste and breeding they had always possessed.

And now Harry had brought two Weasleys to breakfast.

Lucius eyed them warily as he sipped his tea. The two boys were lanky as ropes, and exactly identical, and even though they had done

nothing so far but grin, Draco and Harry were both flinching as if they expected more every moment. Narcissa had taken one look at the twins and absented herself from breakfast, claiming that she had a headache which only walking about in mud would cure. Lucius had offered to escort her, but had been reminded that the owner of the tent should remain to offer hospitality to his guests. Implicit in Narcissa's reminder was the one that they would probably lose the tent if they left two Weasleys alone in it with only Harry and Draco for company.

Lucius sneered. Probably return to find it Transfigured into a pile of Galleons. Merlin knows the Weasleys need the money.

"Mr. Malfoy."

Now one of them was addressing him. Lucius tightened his grip on his teacup and wished he could pretend to be oblivious, as if he read the Daily Prophet for his own edification. But when the same voice repeated his name, he concealed a sigh and lowered the teacup to the table. He had altered the table's composition from stone to wood when he saw the visitors. There was no reason to treat the Weasleys with a higher standard than they were accustomed to.

"Yes?" he snapped at the twin. The boy grinned at him. There really didn't seem to be much of Arthur in him, Lucius had to admit, but he had red hair, and freckles, and the Weasley air of looking at the world as if it were an enormous gift to be unwrapped, instead of a maze to be understood and walked through. That was enough.

"Allow me to offer you our congratulations on the joining of your son and Harry," said the boy pompously. "We have a number of products that you might be interested in—"

"Oh, Merlin, George, not here," Lucius heard Harry say, with the smallest of groans in his voice.

Lucius felt his muscles grow tight, to the point of snapping. He knew his voice had dropped onto a glacial level when he said, "I beg your pardon?" and felt the table shiver with the force of his leashed magic.

“A number of products to make the eventual joining more poetic,” the Weasley said, and gave him another of those idiotic grins. “We have a prototype here. Fred?” He nodded to his brother, while Lucius was meditating on what sort of pureblood family would give their children such prosaic names, and the other pulled a small, silk-wrapped package from his robe pocket.

“Imagine,” said the other twin, in a hushed voice, “this beauty proclaiming the joining ritual to all and sundry, when you decide to have it!” Then he whipped the silk off, and tapped the object.

Lucius started hard at it. It appeared to be a green box ornamented with golden curlicues—garish, of course, the way he would expect of something the Weasleys thought a treasure, but otherwise ordinary. Harry and Draco were both edging away from it as if the boy held a snake, however.

No, Lucius thought, as if the boy held a piece of the Dark Lord. Harry would not fear any snake, no matter how venomous, and Lucius could have spoken to one as well.

“Please do the honors, Mr. Malfoy,” said the Weasley, and extended the box towards him with a little bow.

Harry hissed, “Fred, no!” and shook his head at Lucius. Fred turned a wounded, innocent look on Harry.

“Now, Harry, I never believed those rumors about the Malfoys being a pack of slimy cowards,” he said. “Your consort does a good enough job of protecting you in school. I think Mr. Malfoy deserves a chance to show that he’s just as brave as his son.”

Lucius knew there was no way he would get out of this without embarrassing himself. At least, if he accepted the box, it would only be embarrassment that they were forcing upon him. If he walked away, then he would be committing the sin of abandoning guests in his tent without just cause to dismiss them. With a smile that hid how tightly his teeth were clenched, he reached out and opened the box.

A puff of colored light and smoke rose into his face. Lucius blinked, and then looked around. He could see no obvious effect of the box. Then he caught sight of Draco staring at him in horror, and looked down at himself.

His robes were a brilliant, garish green, like a Gryffindor maniac's idea of what the Slytherin colors should be. Red lettering marched along it, making him look like a bloody Christmas tree. The lettering spelled out Happy joining, Harry and Draco! and sometimes smoked and sometimes steamed, to draw further attention to itself. The robes now had pink, gleaming lights fastened at the cuff, and they blinked and beeped happily, now and then imitating the sound of faint cheers.

Even through his fury, Lucius had to admire the amount of magical skill that must have gone into developing this trick. It wouldn't have been easy to fold so many spells into such a small container, much less insure they interacted without influencing each other into unfortunate effects, or activated when the box opened and not before. But that was through his fury.

He looked up in time to catch the flash of a camera. Then the Weasleys were out through the entrance of the tent, laughing all the way, and Harry was sitting there with an absolutely mortified look on his face. Draco didn't look as if he knew whether to sit there in answering embarrassment or to chase the Weasels with his wand held out and avenge the honor of his family.

Lucius managed to control his impulse to shout. He put the box back on the table, though he closed it first, hoping that might remove the spells from his robes. It did no such thing. He smiled tightly at Harry.

"How...interesting," he said.

Harry winced and stared at him through his fingers. "I'm sorry, sir," he murmured. "I thought they could behave themselves. I hoped they wouldn't insist on staying for breakfast, or offering you one of their products, but..." He shrugged helplessly, as if to point out that what he hadn't wanted had happened, which Lucius knew perfectly well. One of his robe cuffs beeped, to emphasize the point.

“I understand that you were the one who gave them the thousand Galleons they would need to start their business?” Lucius asked, as if only mildly interested. When Harry nodded, he added, “Can I ask why?”

“Because they have the talent and determination to do what they want,” said Harry, blinking at him. “And they’re magical geniuses, sir. They really are. They’ve already created amazing effects with a limited amount of money. I thought they might become even more amazing if they had the fortune to do what they wanted. It could prevent them from becoming bitter, and turning their pranks into jokes of true malice because they didn’t have any better outlet for their emotions.”

“And, of course, you weren’t thinking at all about what weapons they might make for us in battle,” Lucius said softly.

Harry swallowed. “That wasn’t at the top of my mind, sir.”

But it was under the surface, I think. Lucius found comfort in thinking of his future son-in-law this way. Really, it was all very well to acquire a reputation as a philanthropist—sometimes it was one of the most powerful political tools one could wield in the Ministry—but being one was a different matter. Harry would have to learn that there were better things to spend the fortune on.

And he would have to learn that there were better means of vengeance than the immediate strike that both Harry and the Weasleys seemed to have expected Lucius to launch. Lucius would wait, and watch, and see when the best opportunity to avenge the insult arose.

It would be one that both helped him and hurt the Weasleys, ideally. He had had no idea that those troublesome twins were so close to Harry, and it would be better to separate him from them as soon as possible.

“This is nothing magic cannot cure,” he said, soothingly, and that was true, though he might have to give these robes to his house elves and let them try their magic on them. “Now, finish your breakfast.”

Harry nodded, murmured another apology, and then turned back to do so. Draco slid a hand down his shoulder in comfort, and whispered something. Harry leaned into him so readily that any of Lucius's fears about Harry's acceptance of the joining as only a political stunt were allayed.

Now that he is so closely allied to us, we can do far more. Lucius felt his mouth curl into a vicious smile. Avenging ourselves on the Weasleys is only part of it. There are other families waiting for us to take our rightful place above them. I wonder if Harry will ever realize that, by declaring himself about to be joined and closing off paths with which other people might claim him, he has made himself an enemy of those families the Malfoys are enemies of?

He did not think Harry realized it. He believed that most of his would-be allies who had left the gathering had done so because their principles didn't march with his. Lucius knew of at least three families, however, who had departed because they knew they would not be able to combat the Malfoy influence on Harry.

That is well for right now. When I die, then Harry will have to have more political competence, but I can guide him until then. It would be confusing for him to try and absorb this right now.

With that comforting thought, Lucius felt equal to returning to his breakfast, even though Narcissa came in, looked at his changed robes, and declared that she had another headache.

Harry ducked the sweep of a wing as the Opaleye settled the stones she'd been carrying into place. Then he finished Transfiguring the last of his own boulders, eyed the lines of the circle they'd drawn on the grass, and nodded.

The current of magic that ran through the Woodhouse valley had proven unexpectedly resistant to letting them put boulders from the valley's sides together in a circular shape, even though it hadn't cared when Harry, Regulus, and Peter assembled the stage and steps. After the third attempt, and the third time that the current tore the stone from his imagined "hands" and put it back where it belonged, Harry had given in and asked the dragon to assemble the boulders.

The current appeared to accept the dragon as a beast to put up with, and while she flew back and forth with stones, it continued its tame circling.

She was done now, and they had a round table, with boulders placed around it which Harry had Transfigured into chairs. He had thought of draping family pennants over them, but for all he knew, he wouldn't get a detail right and one of his allies would be insulted. If they wanted to mark their own seats, then they could do so.

The table was more than a hundred feet wide and more than twice that long. The dragon had been clever enough to put the boulders with their smoothest sides upright, so that it worked out as a tabletop. Harry had already selected his seat, which was on the southern side of the table, somewhere near the middle but not exactly. He wasn't going to look as if he had a more important position than anyone else by taking the head, when the whole point of a round table in the first place was to give an impression of equality.

"Harry."

Harry turned towards Acies, who was standing beside him with no sign of how she'd arrived. That was all right; Harry was almost used to her sudden appearances and disappearances by now. "Yes, ma'am?" he murmured.

Acies looked up at the Opaleye, as if communing with her, and didn't respond for a long moment. Then she said, "You are on an anvil. The hammer is about to descend upon you again."

Harry blinked. "I do consider the meeting a forging," he said. "But I consider most experiences in my life a forging." He wondered, sometimes, what ultimate end most of those experiences were shaping him for: facing Voldemort, accomplishing his vates task, or something altogether different. Then he scolded himself for thinking that the world turned around him like that. Prophecy or not, he didn't want to weave a narrative of his life in which destiny was the primary focus. Perhaps the experiences shaped him simply for living. That would make the most sense.

“And the harder they temper you, the less likely you are to break,” said Acies, pulling his gaze back to her. “But this one will fall as a hard blow. Remember that you cannot heal everything, and that when the blades of others’ lives shatter, they cannot always be repaired.” She turned and walked away, her cloak swishing along the grass. Harry stood and watched her go.

She had confirmed for him already that a prophecy might come true three times, that there was no mystical rule against it—though none that said it could happen, either. She had recited that prophecy about the storms again when Harry asked her, and strengthened Harry’s conviction that he was right, that a storm of Light would descend on Midsummer Day, and at Hogwarts. Two storms for the year, the prophecy said, and Midsummer Day marked halfway around the year from Midwinter and the storm of the wild Dark.

And a year since the day Voldemort and Bellatrix had taken his hand.

Harry winced as a sharp twinge of phantom pain jolted up his left wrist, then resolved not to let it bother him. The important thing was setting up the trap so that it would take Voldemort, and, before that, getting through this meeting.

And if a hammer would fall on the anvil this time...

Well. That was what would happen.

Harry turned towards the Opaleye, who had landed next to the table and cocked her head at him, and nodded his approval of the table’s construction. As if that had been a signal, she lowered her head and laid it down next to him. Harry let her stare at him, not knowing what else she wanted.

Perhaps that’s a good thing. I don’t want to get so confident that I forget there are forces in the world greater than I am. For a moment, his hand brushed against the stone impregnated with the foul magic, still stored in a robe pocket. Nor absorb so much magic that I think magic is the end-all and be-all of someone’s strength.

Augustus Starrise stretched luxuriously as he stepped out of his tent. His staff of white oak was in his hand, the bands of gold catching the sunlight and sparking it back, and he had a head full of good dreams.

Last night, he had seen and spoken with Alba for a long time in his dreams. She had reassured him that she loved him, and that he had not taken too long to find her murderers. That had reassured Augustus. Dedicated as he was to his justice quest, he could not help feeling like a failure that it had lasted so long.

He strode rapidly through the grass in the direction of the immense stone table Harry had set up, in deliberate echo of another stone table. Augustus found the gesture amusing, but not as amusing as the fact that the Apollonis tent was missing from its place. It appeared that Cupressus hadn't been able to accept Harry's ultimatum, and had taken his leave.

He listened to threads of conversation as he wandered in circles, yawning and touching his staff now and then as if he weren't quite awake. The sense of his sister's spirit accompanying him hadn't faded yet, and it mingled with the opinions that people didn't know he overheard. Augustus found the various reactions to Harry's little speech yesterday interesting.

"—don't really think that he has the right to tell us what to do with our house elves," said one stuffy voice.

"Then why are you still here?" countered the other, and the first person didn't seem to have an answer to that. Augustus smiled, though he kept his eyes straight ahead. In time, he thought that most of the wizards and witches who had decided to remain past that initial statement of revolution would yield to Harry's demands. Keeping house elves was a luxury, now, not a need; there were plenty of Muggleborns and even poorer pureblood families who did without them. That didn't mean Augustus was eager to give up his own, but next to what Harry could offer his allies, it was not sensible to continue clinging to outmoded custom.

“Think that he’ll stay with the Malfoy boy?” Flora Dawnborn was asking her sister Fauna, one of the most inveterate matchmakers in wizarding Britain.

“Only until someone better comes along,” Fauna said with a sharp nod of her head. “He said it himself. The Malfoy boy’s the first one who snared his attention, that’s all, the first friend he ever had. Bonds like that last only until a deeper and more mature love comes along and absorbs a young man’s passion. I think Proteus might be perfect for him, don’t you?” she added.

Augustus had to rack his brain for a moment before he remembered Proteus Dawnborn. Then he snorted. A puffed-up little Light wizard, that one, even worse than the Malfoy heir, with only his allegiance to recommend him. Fauna was mad to think he stood a chance of capturing Harry’s interest.

Of course, the ritual he referred to, the one that begins Walpurgis Night, is a three-year dance, if I remember correctly. That means that someone else might interrupt it before it finishes, and snare Harry’s attention before the crucial Halloween when he’ll be unable to back out of it...hmmm.

Much as he tried to think of a relative of his who would snare Harry, however, Augustus couldn’t come up with a candidate. Pharos was to be married soon, and his brother’s children were all too young—and girls besides, which might not be a barrier, but, on the other hand, might be. Certainly Tybalt had refused to consider any of his cousins, even when Augustus had pleaded political expediency. Some wizards and witches were like that, seeing the sex before the person. Augustus couldn’t understand the attitude himself, but then, he didn’t need to understand it, just be aware of it and manipulate it—or, in Tybalt’s case, give up in disgust when he threw himself away on a Muggleborn, not even an eligible young man.

“Paul won’t like it,” a witch he knew only slightly was telling a friend of hers.

“Really?” Her friend leaned nearer, her voice a bit breathless, and Augustus took the opportunity to pretend to search for something he’d dropped in the grass, so that he’d have an excuse to listen.

“Really,” confirmed the witch, with a nod. “After all, if Lord Harry’s going after centaurs and house elves and dragons this year, who’s to say that he won’t be going after Granians the next? Paul and the other breeders won’t be pleased, oh no, if His Lordship wants them to free their stock instead of breeding and selling.”

“I hadn’t considered the economic aspect of this, I must admit,” her friend said, looking disturbed.

Augustus frowned as he moved on. He knew Paul, at least if he was Paul Fredericks, breeder of the fastest Granian flying horses in Britain. He was part of a more than slightly fanatical political group called Shield of the Granian, which had leaned on the Ministry in the past to change laws that would have affected their breeders. They had money and power backing them. Harry should think twice before he went up against them, or encouraged them to go up against him.

Of course, he won’t. Say what you want about our young Lord, but he’s more than dedicated to his cause.

Augustus moved on, taking in reactions and a cup of hot tea that one of his house elves, when summoned, brought him. Most of the reactions he heard were positive, but cautious. Harry was refusing to play by too many rules for these wizards and witches to feel entirely comfortable with him. He wouldn’t claim the title of Lord. He wouldn’t use the Black fortune, at least so far, for bribery and the more subtle gifts that bought future favors. He had joined himself to the Malfoy family, but had reached out to Light wizards. And now this, his determination to haul the wizarding world into revolution whether it wanted it or not.

Augustus shook his head as he assumed a seat at the table. He is making this harder than it needs to be. If he learned to compromise, he might achieve more of what he wants.

It was not long before the other allies who had chosen to stay assembled, many of them casting a glamour of their family flag on the back of their chairs. Harry had one of only two blank seats in the midst of them, by the time he showed up. He had his scowling guardian, Severus Snape, on one side, who refused to cast the glamour he was entitled to; Augustus knew his mother had been a witch of the once-powerful Prince line. The other side was thick with Malfoys and their blue-gray. On the far side of Snape sat the resurrected Black, Regulus. He had tried to cast a glamour of the Black crest on the back of Harry's chair, but the moment Harry appeared and looked at it, it vanished.

Harry leaned forward and cast whatever charm it was that made his voice appear to sound directly in one's ears. Augustus shook his head. It was an effective political tool, in one way, but in another, it promised an intimacy, a personal touch to the politics, that Augustus doubted Harry would be able to sustain.

"Thank you for coming," said Harry. "Yesterday was a general introduction to my purposes and the purposes of this alliance, which I thank you for enduring, as I know the recitation was redundant for those who've paid attention to me." A chuckle moved up and down the table. "Today, I have a favor to ask of the Light families who have linchpins in the north of England." And he turned his eyes on Augustus, and the Dawnborns, and the Griffinsnest representatives, and Laura Gloryflower.

Augustus caught his breath in surprise. Can he mean to ask us to give up our linchpins? Surely he would not be that bold.

He was distracted for a moment as his staff gave a spark. But when he glanced at it, his sister had nothing to say to him as yet. Augustus could feel her spirit searching the table, however. He leaned back in his chair and tried to relax.

"The linchpins are the stakes in a web that binds the northern goblins," said Harry bluntly. "It was done to make them unable to hurt wizards, so far as I can determine, and also to stop some land that wizards valued from sliding into the sea. There are two ways I know of that the web can be removed. One is to sacrifice enough magic to

take the place of the linchpins in the web.” For some reason, his hand brushed his robe pocket. Augustus repressed the temptation to snort. If he thinks he can channel enough magic through his wand for that to happen, he should think again. “Another is to change the nature of the inheritance, so that the linchpins are no longer linchpins and each Light family inheritance is bound to one person, as happens in some Dark families, including the Blacks. My brother has already allowed this to be done.”

Pandemonium answered him. Augustus leaned back in his chair, distracted both by the way that the golden band at the end of his staff sparkled and by the fact that he thought he should say nothing. Of course Harry’s second suggestion was ridiculous; the linchpins were precious, a matter of pride and a family’s legacy, and perhaps only someone like Connor Potter, a half-blood reared away from his ancestors’ traditions, could consider it seriously. But the first might have possibilities, merit. Augustus had no particular investment in the slavery of the northern goblins, as long as Harry could persuade them not to attack the wizards.

The southern goblins are a different matter, but we would know if they were free. They would have attacked the wizarding world at once.

As he had expected would happen, one voice emerged, calmly, from the center of the maelstrom. That was Laura Gloryflower’s. The puellaris witch had a commanding presence when she chose to exert it, and she was on her feet now, her face set and a golden aura playing around her. Augustus was close enough to smell the thick, musky scent that came from her when she was on the edge of transforming into a lioness.

“Harry,” she told the fifteen-year-old they were here, nominally at least, to follow, “tell us why you think we should give up our heritage.”

Harry smiled. “Because you would not be giving up your heritage,” he said. “I could spare your houses, your lands, and all the priceless treasures inside your houses. The only thing that would change is that your houses would no longer have their connection to the earth.”

“But that makes them linchpins,” said Laura intently.

Harry leaned back in his seat and raised his eyebrows. "I was under the impression that what made them linchpins was their link to the moods of the current family leader, and the fact that if the house is attacked by an enemy, it will drain strength for its wards from the family."

"That is true." Laura settled her hands in front of her, a gesture that Augustus recognized of old. She was trying to keep herself from fussing with her robes. She lowered her voice, too. "But the link is grounded in the earth. That is what, as you pointed out, keeps the earth from sliding into the sea. How do you propose to change the nature of that link and yet keep them linchpins?"

"By linking the wards to the sacrificed magic," said Harry, just as quietly. "Some power will be given to maintain the linchpins as they are, but with their wards flowing into pure magic instead of the earth. The rest will go to replace the linchpins in the northern goblins' web. Then, when the goblins pull, the web will shred without disturbing your estates." He cocked his head. "The goblins have already agreed to this. I need your permission, and your permission only, to change the anchor of the wards. Then they shall be free."

"And the goblins really won't attack the northern families?" Laura asked. Her face was so stern that Augustus hoped no one tried to interrupt her. The last thing they needed right now was a lioness springing on someone who'd insulted her or Harry.

"They swore so, by the most sacred oaths they have," said Harry. "They used to do mining and minting for our ancestors, but most of those tasks have been taken over by the southern goblins. All the web does now is assist the paranoia of our ancestors, and prevent the goblins from practicing some of their most sacred rites. With it gone, the only difference you'll notice is that any goblins you encounter might be a bit less deferential than normal. I think you can live with that," he added, and his voice was smeared with an emotion only partly contempt.

"I can live with it," said Laura. "I do not know about everyone else." She sat down, yielding the table to members of other northern families.

Augustus spoke first, partly because the sparking of his staff had died for the moment and partly because even Harry's preferred solution had something wrong with it. "It sounds as though unbinding this web will take an enormous amount of power."

Harry nodded. "It will."

"And where will you get that much magic?" Augustus eyed the boy, wondering if his sacrificial instincts were really so strong that he'd leave himself a Squib for the sake of some goblins. Perhaps he did think that others would follow him even if he were powerless, which indicated a lack of basic understanding about the way the wizarding world and its politics worked.

Harry raised his eyebrows, and a dark smile touched the corners of his mouth. "You forget I'm an absorbere, sir," he said. "I can gather in that much magic, and channel it for my purposes. Both my gift and my will are strong enough."

Augustus refused to shiver. Being reminded so suddenly that the teenager sitting across from him was a magic-eater did shock him a bit, but he would just have to get used to it. "I thought that you would not take magic unless it was willingly yielded," he said.

"There are some of my enemies who've given up their immunity to my dislike of eating magic," said Harry. "Voldemort, for one. And I have other sources that I haven't told anyone about." That made the Malfoys start and glance at him sharply. Harry didn't appear to notice. "I can accomplish this, sir, you don't need to worry about that. But I need the linchpin families' permission. Contrary to what some people might think, I do care about the opinions of my own species. I will do nothing without your permission."

Augustus tapped his fingers on the table. Put like that, it seemed the greatest obstacle was that Harry wouldn't be able to do this, that something would go wrong when he tried to replace the linchpins with

the sacrificed magic in the goblins' web. It was a large chance. On the other hand, Augustus didn't know enough about such procedures to determine that something would go wrong, and to refuse because he didn't trust Harry enough would be an insult.

He could see similar emotions at play on the faces of the witches and wizards beside him. Many of them owned several small estates that were linchpins. Come to think of it, Augustus couldn't think of one linchpin-owning family that was missing. Some of them would have stayed because Starrise was Harry's ally, but not all of them. Augustus wondered if that was good fortune, or conspiracy, or the combination of both that seemed to attend Harry.

Harry waited, looking calm and content and fearless. Laura Gloryflower spoke a few minutes later. "For my part, I accept, and will yield the Gloryflower linchpins to the change."

Harry smiled at her. "Thank you, ma'am." He glanced down the table, and waited some more.

One by one, other, minor families, some of their members looking at Augustus, gave their permission. Augustus waited in magnificent silence. He saw no reason to rush. He would look the more gracious for giving his permission after waiting so long.

At last, it came down to him and Flora Dawnborn. Augustus listened to her assent, and then jerked his head sharply sideways. His staff had vibrated in his hand, and now he could see a ghostly mist of gold and white forming above the end of it. He caught his breath.

Alba, sister, are you telling me the name of your murderer at last? Since his sister had died before the enchantments on the staff were complete, Augustus had had little hope of discovering one of the murderers until he was in his presence. But time and proximity had done their work at last. He could see an image of his sister's face as it had looked in the year of her death forming above the staff, looking fretfully back and forth.

Then a hand of white light sprang from the image. Augustus followed the sweep of its fingers, feeling a deep, clear, strange inevitability overtake him.

The hand pointed straight at Adalrico Bulstrode.

Augustus felt the inevitability yield to savage gladness. The oath he had sworn not to use magic except in self-defense was gone from his mind. What mattered was that he finally, finally knew who one of his sister's murderers was.

In a loud, deep voice, he began the incantation of the *Caerimonia Inrevocabilis*, the highest and sternest of the justice rituals. It would take Adalrico's life, and his own, in payment. Augustus did not care. Other concerns melted and dropped away from him. He was no longer a part of the living world in any case, to worry about them. Harry heard the chant begin. Later, he could feel thankful that he was already looking towards Augustus's section of the table. He saw the man rise to his feet, holding out his white oak staff banded with gold, his eyes focused on Adalrico.

Harry rose to his feet, his hand held out. "Augustus," he said. "Mr. Starrise."

Augustus gave no sign that he'd heard him. In fact, his chant was picking up speed, and Harry recognized it, now. There was no way he could allow that ritual to be completed, both because it would kill and because this was such a delicate time and place. A Light wizard killing both a Dark wizard and himself might be the boulder that shattered the alliance.

Harry shouted the word, so that everyone could hear him. "Silencio!"

Augustus's voice ceased in an instant. The gathering power of the ritual wavered for a moment, then fell off and drained away. Harry stood in the center of a spreading pool of silence, as though his spell had been aimed at more people than just that one, and felt Snape place a hand on his shoulder, Draco rise and touch his arm.

“Why, Mr. Starrise,” Harry asked, when he was certain he had everyone’s attention, “would you be trying to use a justice ritual on Mr. Bulstrode, a man I am certain has done you no harm, and against the oath you took that forbids offensive use of magic here?” A subtle gesture of his hand disrupted the silencing spell so Augustus could answer, though Harry stood ready to renew it in an instant if he tried to take up the justice ritual again.

Augustus didn’t try. His face was beatific, and he answered readily. “No harm? Is that what he told you, Harry? No, no. It is not so.” He laughed, and the laughter was not sane. “He was one of the Death Eaters who captured and tortured my sister Alba, so badly that when the Aurors rescued her, she hanged herself. I am claiming vengeance. It took me fourteen years to find him, but here he is at last. There is no law in the world that can keep me from laying my heart and Alba’s to rest.” He smiled at Harry. “I am sorry to abandon your alliance just as it is forming, my Lord. I would have liked to see what happened in its wake. But this is a higher duty, a greater. I am going to kill the murderer of my sister.”

“You have no proof,” said Harry softly, though he could feel his heart beating erratically. He had not yet dared to look at Adalrico.

“My sister helped me with the enchantments on my staff,” said Augustus. “She did not live to complete them, and thus it took them years of preparation and hours in the company of the murderer before she could locate him. But now she has. I trust Alba’s spirit, my Lord. And it makes sense, truly. Adalrico Bulstrode has long had a reputation as the most cruelly inventive of the Death Eaters. I should have suspected him before this.” He sighed, his voice longing. “But I did not want to condemn an innocent man to death.”

Harry took a deep breath and turned to face Adalrico. “Is this true, Mr. Bulstrode?” he asked.

One glance into Adalrico’s face told him it was. Adalrico was still, silent, his mouth clamped shut and the lines of his skin, crow’s feet and laughter lines and all, white. He stared at Augustus as if he were a creature come out of nightmare.

Then he met Harry's eyes, and his face relaxed. "You know what the verdict was from the Wizengamot, Harry," he said softly. "I was under the Imperius Curse, and not myself at the time, so I cannot be held responsible for what I did at Voldemort's behest. And I cannot be tried twice for the same crime," he added, just in case anyone had missed the point of his mentioning the Wizengamot.

"That does not matter," said Augustus. Now he didn't sound human, as if he were some masked spirit of justice come riding out of story. "I still claim justice. I know what he did. I shall have justice."

Harry looked at Adalrico, and could think of nothing to say. He knew, if no one else there did, that Adalrico had been a willing Death Eater, as much in control of his own actions as Lucius was. And now he had no idea which was the greatest allegiance: to truth, to justice, to the family alliance he had sworn with the Bulstrodes, or to the fact that he'd tried to move on, put his allies' crimes in the past, and accept that they had changed and become different people.

"I want to know who the other Death Eaters who helped him were, mind," Augustus's voice said, warm and distant. "I would like to know that. That might be worth staying alive for."

Harry cocked his head at Adalrico, who answered in a clipped voice, "They died in Azkaban. All of them."

"I suppose I can accept that," said Augustus. "Since I am about to have justice on you, and you have not only lived, but never served a penance for your crimes."

"I will not allow you to use the *Caerimonia Inrevocabilis*," said Harry, certain of this, at least. "It breaks all the rules I have asked you to abide by, not only the oath you swore before the alliance meeting, but also the rules that prevent you from attacking someone else in the alliance."

Augustus bowed to him and took his staff in his hands, moving it in a pattern Harry didn't recognize. A moment later, he felt a bond he hadn't known was there loosen, and Augustus said in a clear voice, "I formally resign from the alliance that I entered into with Harry, once

called Potter. Let magic witness that this was done willingly on my part, and because of no fault on his.”

Harry ground his teeth. “Then you must leave Woodhouse,” he said. “I cannot permit—“

“Woodhouse is a place within the wizarding world, and it belongs to you as much as it belongs to anyone right now,” Augustus interrupted contemplatively. “But there is a place outside the wizarding world, outside law, outside anything but honor.” He faced Adalrico, and his voice gained depth like a stream flooded with snowmelt. “I call Adalrico Bulstrode to that place, in the name of Merlin, in the name of sea and stone and silver and gold. To that place, only honor will guide us, and from it, only blood will release us. If he refuses this call, may the consequences fall upon his head.”

Harry didn’t recognize that ritual, but Adalrico obviously did. His hands clenched in front of him, and then he said, “Far be it from me to refuse this call. I come through in honor, and will depart in blood. In the name of bronze and iron and fire and wind, in the name of Merlin, I answer Augustus Starrise.”

Augustus gave a wide, genuine smile, and inclined his head. “Tomorrow, then, Bulstrode,” he said softly, and turned away, striding rapidly from the table, with his cloak fluttering behind him.

Harry turned to Adalrico. “What does that mean?” he asked, without pause.

It was Elfrida who answered him, voice soft. “It means that my husband is called to a duel of honor,” she said. She cradled Marian against her with one arm, and her eyes were wide. “If he had refused it, his children would have become Squibs, and every Bulstrode born from now until the end of time would be a Squib, likewise. The duel is to the death.”

Harry gave a shudder. Adalrico was a savage, skilled fighter, and the inventiveness and cruelty that Augustus had accused him of would function to keep him alive. On the other hand, Augustus Starrise was

a trained war wizard, and especially good at duels, from what Harry had heard, and ridden by vengeance.

And, tomorrow, one of them would die.

Harry closed his eyes.

Chapter Seventy-Four: The High Cost of Vengeance

Millicent sat in silence with her father. Adalrico had asked Elfrida to take Marian outside and walk with her for a little while, although still within the protective wards of their tent. There was no telling whether Starrise might not try to strike at his enemy's family before the duel. He'd have to use someone else to do it, but from what her father had said, Millicent thought that would be like him.

Adalrico had sent her mother outside five minutes ago, and still he hadn't said anything. Millicent did her best to remain still, holding her breath and willing her heart to beat more slowly. All the while, she wondered why she was so affected. She had not expected her father to die of old age. He could easily have perished in one of the battles that Harry wanted him to fight, or at the hand of a Death Eater assassin who would start taking out Harry's most valued allies. She should have expected something like this from around every corner, instead of feeling as if it had struck from overhead like a lightning bolt.

"Millicent."

At last, he's getting to it. Millicent sat up and fastened her eyes on her father's face. Adalrico said nothing else for a long moment, but his fingers were moving now, tapping on his legs while he gazed into their bonfire with a faint frown on his face. It was more movement than he'd shown since sending Elfrida and Marian out. Millicent waited, as patient as she could make herself.

"I want you to remember," said Adalrico, "our motto."

"Duramus," Millicent whispered. We endure. And the Bulstrodes did, lasting out the crises that diminished the power and fortune of many other pureblood families. They had never wanted to achieve the dizzy heights of ambition that the Malfoys aimed for. They wanted to remain alive and comfortable—rich, of course, and with people paying them respect, but without enemies staring them in the eye.

"If I die tomorrow," said Adalrico, "you will become the head of our family, Millicent. I want you to hold firm to our motto in public. No tears. I want your face to be as hard as stone."

Millicent nodded. "Do you have other instructions for me, father, in the event of your death?" she asked. Her tongue scarcely moved in her mouth, feeling as if it, in turn, were made of stone.

"You may accept the hand of Pierre Delacour," said Adalrico judiciously. "I have studied his family. Rich enough, and while they've interbred with both Muggles and Veela, they've not been obnoxious about it. They always come back to pureblood wizards and witches in the end. I give you my blessing for him."

Millicent nodded. "And for my mother and sister?" she whispered.

"Use some of our money to make sure Marian gets private tutoring." Adalrico made a large movement for the first time since he'd arrived back in the tent, bending down and lifting the goblet of wine that had sat beside his stool. "I don't want her attending Hogwarts, until and unless the school is actually better ten years from now. She'd be taught things there that a young magical heir shouldn't have to learn. I didn't think I had any choice with you, Millicent, or I would have sent you somewhere else, too." He met her eyes directly for a moment. "Will you forgive me?"

Millicent choked back the stupid, ridiculous, stupid tears that wanted to rise up her throat. "There's nothing to forgive," she whispered. "I'm glad I attend Hogwarts. How would we have met Harry and learned about him otherwise?"

Adalrico gave a faint smile. "I imagine we would still have heard of him from Mrs. Malfoy. She's a rather insistent dancer. But—well, I won't make you regret the way things have gone, daughter. I'm glad that you like your life the way it is." He put the goblet down again, and held out his hand to her. His skin briefly turned the color of quartz. "Will you clasp hands with me, daughter, for old times' sake?"

Millicent nodded. Her own skin turned transparent and glittering when she concentrated, and she moved her fist forward and through her father's. For a moment, she felt his flesh and muscle as if it were her own, the rush of foreign blood through her veins, the pulling of skin

over unfamiliar tendons. From the look on her father's face, he was feeling the same thing.

"Based in stone," he whispered, "through the stone we commune, and like stone we endure. Duramus."

Millicent nodded again. She could say nothing without choking on tears that were unworthy of her, as a magical heir and the future head of the Bulstrode family in the event of her father's death. She sat tall and proud instead as Adalrico leaned forward and placed his shining fist on her brow.

"Call your mother in, please, Millicent," he said, leaning back on the stool. The light left his hand.

She rose to fetch Elfrida and Marian, and when that was done, she stood outside the tent and looked up at the stars for a long time.

"Uncle. You wanted to speak with me?"

Augustus looked up with a small, hard smile. He supposed he shouldn't take such joy in the fact that his possible death compelled his wild nephew to listen to him, but he wouldn't lie to himself the night before such a duel. Tybalt was only listening to him because Augustus might not be here to listen to tomorrow, and they both knew it.

"Yes." Augustus gestured for Tybalt to take a seat on the chair he'd Transfigured from a hump of grass, secretly pleased to see that his nephew really hadn't brought his Muggleborn partner. Tybalt wasn't entirely lost to family honor after all, then. That would make the things Augustus had to tell him easier. "I have something to tell you."

Tybalt sat down and stared up at him. Augustus stood still and stared back. He loved and treasured his nephew Pharos, his heir. He was the one who would carry on the Starrise family legacy, and he would do it with a grace that Augustus knew to be beyond him, himself.

That was why he would never say aloud that Tybalt was the one who more reminded him of his sister Alba. It was partly his face, of course,

those wide eyes and that pale hair, but it was also in the gestures he made, his grip on his wand and his method of turning on one heel.

“I’ve found one of the murderers of your mother,” said Augustus at last, when some moments had passed in silence. “I would have thought you’d be pleased.”

Tybalt shook his head. “I did my mourning for Mother a long time ago,” he said, his words impatient—always so impatient, Augustus thought, as though wizards did not have decades to achieve what they wanted to do. But then, he’d been impatient, too, to find the murderers and complete his justice quest. “I haven’t let her death taint my life. And I never realized how deep the venom had run in you, Uncle, or I would have tried to purge it a long time ago.”

Augustus snorted. “Would you have, now? I was under the impression that you did not care about this family, Tybalt, with the way that you can toss aside our traditions as if they were dandelion down.”

“I don’t care about it in the same way,” said Tybalt, voice sharpening. “But yes, I do still care, Uncle. And above all, Mother is dead. Has been dead for years. She doesn’t have any options anymore; she can’t change. You’re alive. You can change. And you’ve chosen to do something that will not only lose a vates I love and follow a large political advantage, but which will probably cost you your life.”

“Are you sure about that?” Augustus touched his white staff, and heard his sister breathing words of love and praise into his ear. He’d heard them ever since she was able to point at Bulstrode. It was impossible to describe the contentment he felt. The gaping wound of his life had closed at last. “I am a trained duelist. Yes, Bulstrode’s a fighter, but not trained in the way I am, or he’d wear the bells.”

“He is a fighter,” said Tybalt. “Not a duelist. I know where the advantage lies in battle, Uncle. I’ve seen battle now, in case you forgot.” His eyes were large and dark, and Augustus realized that, yes, he had forgotten that Tybalt had fought a battle in the very valley where they stood now. “I wish you had not done this. I know that you

have no choice but to follow through with it, now. But I wish you hadn't done it."

Augustus shook his head in wonder. Any anger he had felt burning had faded, by now. This was the last night he expected to spend alive, if he was honest. It would be good to go back to his sister, to see Alba again, to talk to her about her sons and the things that had happened when she was alive, those thirty years when he had really lived. Augustus didn't know what the afterlife would actually look like, but he knew what it would sound like. There would be conversations and conversations and conversations, endless talks. Alba had been with him to know the anecdotes he most wanted to tell her, but she would add her perspective to them, a perspective that Augustus had missed like a limb. Possibly Tybalt didn't understand that because he tended to think of her as Augustus's sister, not his twin. That made the difference.

This was his last night, and so he could ask the question that he had wanted to know the answer to since Tybalt had abandoned his family for a non-pureblood. "Why don't you feel more strongly about this, Tybalt? She is your mother."

Tybalt rose to his feet and began to pace back and forth. Augustus watched in silence. He wouldn't order him back to his chair, not when it seemed that Tybalt needed to be on his feet to give his answer.

"She's an encumbrance," said Tybalt at last. "Yes, she was my mother, but neither you nor Pharos ever treated her like that. You treated her like a Muggle saint—" Augustus frowned slightly, but let his comments on the appropriateness of Tybalt studying Muggle religions go "—like someone whose memory had to be watered in case it ever faded. And so I started resenting her. She wasn't someone I could just love and remember. She was someone I had to love. And it took away your time and love from me."

"That, at least, is not true," said Augustus, feeling his wonder deepen. "Pharos would not feel that way."

"That's because he did what you wanted," said Tybalt, raising his eyes to his uncle's face again. "How much of your love for him, Uncle,

is the fact that he loved and fawned on the memory of Alba with you, and how much the fact that he's actually better-suited to lead our family?"

"I do not think you will ever understand, Tybalt." Augustus sighed. Well, I should have known the rift between us was too deep to be crossed or bridged. That's what I get for being optimistic. "As for something else you said, yes, you're right. I have already sent Pharos an owl telling him not to give the linchpin to Harry."

Tybalt jerked. "Why not?" he whispered.

"Can you ask?" Augustus raised his eyebrows. "He had a murderer in his company. If I die, then that murderer will still be alive, and I can't see Harry rejecting him. A torturer, a rapist—Harry had to have at least suspected he'd done those things, since he was a Death Eater, and he accepted him anyway." Augustus shook his head. "I knew it in the abstract, and now it has come home for me. It will come home even harder for Pharos, if I die. And if I live, then I shall think myself honor-bound to work against Harry. He won't deliver criminals to justice when he knows they're criminals, Tybalt. What do you think will happen if he finds more of them during this war? He won't punish them, either. Someone will have to."

Tybalt straightened as if under the weight of a heavy burden. "Why did you join the alliance in the first place, Uncle?"

Augustus cocked his head. "Because I thought I might find one of your mother's murderers here, or directions to him," he said. "And I have. And because I thought there was a slight chance that this was the right thing to do. I see it isn't, now. And Pharos sees the same thing."

"You'll try to break Harry's cause whether you live or die," Tybalt whispered.

"I believe I just said that."

Tybalt looked at him in silence for a long moment. Then he said, "Uncle, you've never taken me seriously since I was Sorted into

Gryffindor. Something about foolish courage and rash behavior, I think you said in the first letter you sent me after it.” Augustus nodded, remembering the letter as well as Tybalt did. “Well, I have my own ideals, no matter how wild you think I am. And in this alliance, I’ve found someone I actually want to follow. What makes you imagine that I’ll permit this damage to him?”

Augustus laughed. “Tybalt, there is nothing you can do. I changed my will so that Pharos is my heir.”

“Oh, I know that,” said Tybalt, his eyes in shadow. “And you won’t change the means of inheriting the linchpin.”

“Of course not.”

Tybalt nodded. “That’s all I wanted to know.” He turned away. “I would wish you a clear mind, but it’s a useless wish,” he added over his shoulder.

And those are the last words we’ll ever exchange, Augustus thought in some sadness. But I know Tybalt. I was a fool to suspect anything different. And he’s a fool to think I take him seriously. Your son has become a wild boy, Alba, a feckless, reckless child who never grew up. He may threaten me, but there’s nothing he’ll be able to do when matters come pounding down to the end. He wasn’t made for the kind of politics that we play.

He turned away and went back to listening to the voice of his sister whispering thanks and congratulations and welcome to her world.

“Harry.”

Harry rose to his feet in surprise. A man he hadn’t expected to see until tomorrow, if then, was standing in the entrance to Snape’s tent. Snape at once rose behind him, his wand out. He’d already become an expert at compensating for his weak right leg by letting his left take most of his weight, Harry noted absently.

“Mr. Bulstrode,” he murmured, giving a shallow bow. “Is something the matter? Can I do something for you?” Given what he’d heard about the duel, and what Snape had told him after they came to sit in

private, he knew there was no chance that Adalrico had come to tell him the duel was off.

“Actually, you can,” said Adalrico. “There’s a story I want to tell you. Or an explanation. Yes, call it that.” He glanced at Snape. “I would prefer to do it alone, if you don’t mind, Harry.”

Harry nodded at Snape. Snape studied them with silent dark eyes, then said, “Remember Cardiff, Adalrico.”

With those odd words, which Harry suspected must refer to something that had happened between them in their Death Eater days, Snape limped out of the tent. Harry wondered what he would do. Perhaps watch the moon and stars. Perhaps listen for the sound of a shout, or any other sign that Harry needed him. Harry didn’t think he would eavesdrop. He trusted his guardian too much now to suspect that.

“Please, sit down,” Harry said, Transfiguring one of their stools into a more comfortable, padded chair. Adalrico took it, moving slowly and stiffly. Harry eyed him anxiously as he sat back down. Adalrico noticed, and smiled.

“It’s not a wound,” he said. “I’ve just spent time talking to my wife and daughters, and that fills my mind enough to make my body heavy.” He sighed and bent his dark eyes on the fire. Harry studied his face and said nothing. What was there to say? It was cruel that Adalrico had to fight this duel or lose his daughters’ magical ability to a curse. It was cruel that he might die in the doing, even if he saved his daughters’ magic.

And it was cruel, wasn’t it, what he did to Alba Starrise? You notice that he didn’t deny it.

With his head filled with such boiling thoughts about cruelty and crime and blame, it took Harry a moment to realize that Adalrico was speaking.

“There were five of us,” Adalrico told the flames. “We’d captured her in a series of raids that the Dark Lord ordered us to make while he

prepared for some grand strike. As it turned out, that strike was sending the Lestranges after the Longbottoms and going, himself, after you.” He glanced up at Harry briefly. “We never expected him not to come back. I think he was building up to a celebration when he returned after destroying the latest threat to his power.”

I do not want to hear this. But what does wanting have to do with it? Harry gave a shallow nod to show he was listening.

“We tortured Alba in ordinary ways, at first,” said Adalrico distantly, no longer looking at Harry. “Pain curses and Crucio. She screamed, and then she went quiet and would no longer give us the satisfaction, which was opposite to the way most people went about it. I don’t know if I remember her so well because she was the last person I ever did that to, or because she was unusual and beautiful like some white deer out of a story, but I can see her still: biting her lip, her eyes wide, her hair splayed around her head. When I met Tybalt Starrise, it gave me a shock. He looks like that most of the time.”

Harry said nothing.

Adalrico half-lidded his eyes and took a deep breath. “Then we—one of the others put on a glamour of her brother, and raped her. She screamed then, just once, at the beginning of it, like something was breaking within her. Dolohov cast a spell to make her own hands join in, crawling up and down her body.” Abruptly, his face darkened. “At least, I thought it was Dolohov. I know now that Dolohov died the year before, and it was Evan Rosier under a glamour of him. Which—explains a lot, really.”

Harry said nothing. He tried not to think of a Light witch at Evan Rosier’s mercy, and failed.

“I was the one who suggested that she ought to be made to rape someone herself,” said Adalrico quietly, staring at his hands. “And I was the one who found a child who resembled her elder son.”

Harry jerked to his feet. “Why are you telling me this?” he demanded. “Did you want me to ask you why you did it?”

“Actually, I did.” Adalrico lifted his head. “This is the last lesson I can give you if I die tomorrow, Harry. The reasons I did it, and what happens in war—what is going to happen at least among the Dark Lord’s servants, if not your own. Everything happened to me in a dark place. Nothing mattered anymore except what the Dark Lord said mattered. And it became imperative to believe that, because if we’d been wrong, the path behind us was littered with too much blood and flesh to justify what we’d done.” He took another deep breath. “I had to think that way, when the Dark Lord fell and I emerged from the dark place. I would have committed suicide if not for Elfrida. I reconciled myself to living like a normal person again, and to the fact that that I’d done those things, but it took me seven years.”

“And you think the same thing will happen now,” said Harry. He found it hard to look at Adalrico. “I know that. Knew that. I listened to stories of the First War when I was still a child, Adalrico. I know atrocities happened, and I know they will now. If nothing else, Voldemort hates me too much not to try and hurt me.”

“That’s not exactly what I meant,” said Adalrico carefully. “When the war ended, then the only way I could survive was to face what I’d done. But while it lasted, the only way I could survive was to breathe in the perfume of that poisoned garden and believe it fully. I believe that you’ll die if you try to live in the war like you’d live in a normal time, Harry. You can’t. War marks everyone’s souls. War takes everyone’s souls, at least while they’re fighting it. Afterwards, that’s the time for healing. Reconcile yourself to that, Harry, and you’ll do better.”

“It’s not going to take mine,” said Harry. He had not known that his voice could be that low, or that passionate. “I promise you, Adalrico. I promise you it never will. I will live through this.”

“Of course you have to survive, Harry—“

“Not survive,” said Harry, leaning forward so that he could see the other man’s eyes. “Live. I’m not going to close myself off from the war. I’m not going to become a shell, or stop feeling. I’m going to walk through this with my eyes open. I’m going to take every loss

personally. I'm going to let the war rip my soul to shreds all it wants, but never steal it."

Adalrico gave a convulsive movement. Then he said, "Then I have died knowing your cause will fail, Harry, and so has my instruction." His voice was hemlock-bitter.

"No," said Harry. "You'll die or live tomorrow knowing that I'm a different person than you are, Adalrico." He cocked his head, feeling his lips stretched in a smile that had nothing of humor in it. "But you have reminded me that I should make an important speech tomorrow. Thank you for that."

"Harry, you cannot mean this," said Adalrico. "You will kill my family if you try to fight like that."

Harry shook his head slowly. "No more surely than I would have if I became a copy of Voldemort, or shut myself down for the duration of the war and did not grieve for their deaths," he said. "I've had to learn the hard way that I can't influence everything, can't do everything. I'll do what I can to protect your family, Adalrico. On that, you have my word. I will do anything in my power—except become what you became."

"But that is how one fights a war, Harry." Adalrico blinked at him.

"That is how Voldemort fights a war," said Harry.

Adalrico stared at him for some time more, his eyes wide and troubled. Harry stared back. At last, Adalrico glanced away from him and rose to his feet, shaking his head.

"I don't know how you do that," he muttered. "I come here seeking peace on what could be the last night of my life, and you manage to make me feel unsettled, and troubled, and as if I want to stay alive to see the end of your mad plans."

Good. Then maybe you'll fight harder tomorrow, Harry thought. "Good night, Adalrico," was all he said aloud.

Adalrico departed. Snape came back in at once. "What did he want?" he demanded.

"To tell me about Alba Starrise," said Harry, and raised the flames a bit higher. He imagined he could see a writhing, screaming, raped woman if he looked at the fire long enough. He wondered for a moment if he should tell Augustus that Evan Rosier, at least, was still alive and free of Azkaban. Then he imagined Rosier's pleasure in destroying Augustus, and he knew exactly why Adalrico hadn't done it. He was trying to halt the vengeance here, to insure that it didn't slop over onto others. Harry doubted it was to protect Rosier. He was trying, as hard as it was to imagine, to protect Augustus, or, if he died, the Starrise heirs who might otherwise feel a compulsion to avenge their mother, and would only die.

And if that is not a sign that he has changed from the man he was, I don't know what is.

"Why must you be everyone's confessor?" Snape asked, his voice ragged.

Harry looked up at him in surprise. "I'm sorry," he said after a moment. "I don't know why I didn't think that you'd be affected by the duel, too. Adalrico is your friend, isn't he? Or was."

"I was thinking of you," said Snape.

Harry blinked, then smiled. "I can bear it," he said, facing the fire again. "But I do have some things to say tomorrow."

The dawn came cold and clear, in a pearly gray sky. Harry stood at the entrance of Snape's tent and breathed in the nipping air. Adalrico and Augustus had apparently decided to duel at nine-o'clock, and it was eight now. That left him an hour to say what he wanted to say.

"This is not the wisest move," said Snape at his shoulder.

"So you've said," Harry murmured, not looking at him.

Snape grunted, and fell silent.

Harry began to walk in the direction of the stone table. He saw a few people glance at him curiously, but most didn't look until it was obvious where he was going. A lot of people were staring at him by the time he leaped onto the tabletop and turned to face them, once again casting the spell that would allow his voice to reach their ears without shouting.

"There will be a duel today," he began. "A duel to the death, between Augustus Starrise and Adalrico Bulstrode."

Muffled snorts came to him. Most people would already have known that, of course. Harry raised his eyebrows higher, in a reprimanding expression he'd learned from Snape, or perhaps from Draco; it was hard to remember. This was just the beginning, just the preface, to give them an idea of what he was talking about.

"It is a duel that I do not intend to stop or affect," said Harry. "It is beyond my reach for affecting. I do wish to make it clear that this is an example of the rituals I was speaking of on the first day of this meeting, the ones that enshrine vengeance at the cost of forgiveness, that say pride and honor are more important than life." He snorted, and knew the sound would carry on the spell's wind as readily as the words. "I don't agree," he added. "If Starrise had consulted me before he tried to call the duel on Mr. Bulstrode, I would have advised him not to do it."

"He killed my sister."

Harry had wondered how long it would take Augustus to show up. He turned towards him, and nodded.

"Or was one of those responsible for her death, at least," he said. "As I understand it, she committed suicide when she was rescued."

"And you think that makes him less responsible?" Augustus was in fine form today, every line of his face wrinkled in aristocratic disdain.

"Of course not," said Harry. "But she's dead, Mr. Starrise. And you've wasted your life on a hunt for her murderers that might not have

borne any fruit. They could all have been dead, for what you knew. Or fighting beside Voldemort still, and someone else might have killed them.” Or alive, and so mad that it is plain suicide for a Light wizard to go up against them. “Perhaps you would have faced them, and slain them, and never known it. It’s sheer chance that you’re facing one of them in a duel today. Forgive me, but I don’t think that sheer chance is worth the loss of a life.” He didn’t have to pour contempt into his voice. It was already all there.

“You are lost to honor if you believe otherwise,” Augustus breathed. He was staring at Harry as if seeing him for the first time.

“I already said that I considered some things more important than honor,” said Harry, tossing his fringe out of his eyes and frowning at him. “And that’s something everyone still in the alliance, or thinking about joining it, should know,” he added, turning his eyes on those who watched him. “I don’t think vengeance is an excuse. I don’t care how many rituals justify it. As you’ve seen with this duel, I may sometimes be unable to do anything but despise it. But if I can affect its progression—if I hear that someone who fights with me plans to use torture as a means of vengeance, or a ritual, like this, that puts honor ahead of life—then I will cut that person out of the alliance at once.”

“Is that not trampling on our free wills?” Lucius Malfoy said that, his eyes the color of the sky.

Harry smiled coolly at him. “Of course not. I won’t kill anyone who does this, after all, or drain their magic. But I can and will make them politically powerless, unable to have a say in the formation of the wizarding world. For some people, Mr. Malfoy, that fate is worse than death.” He held Lucius’s eyes, and saw him get the point.

“How unlike a Lord, Harry,” said Augustus, “to restrain himself when he might do more. Cut them out of the alliance? How prosaic and limited a punishment.” His voice was relaxed, a contemptuous drawl.

“I am not a Lord,” said Harry, speaking slowly and clearly. “Apparently, Mr. Starrise, you didn’t understand that the first dozen times I told you, so here is a thirteenth. I want limits. I want checks and balances. I

want the free wills of my allies to be unbounded—except where they step on the free wills of others. You’ve cleverly arranged matters so that I can’t punish you for interfering with Mr. Bulstrode’s free will. Where I can stop others from doing that, I will. All I can do in this situation is resent you terribly for wasting your life and potentially wasting another.” He met Augustus’s eyes and held them. “That is the difference between us.”

“He tortured my sister,” said Augustus. His face was dark now. “He raped her.”

Made her rape someone else, actually, Harry thought. He nodded. “He did,” he said. “And during the First War, the Aurors were granted permission to use the Unforgivable Curses, at least for a short time. Has anyone ever demanded justice for those innocent people who were tortured or compelled or killed in the process of searching out Death Eaters? Wouldn’t they be laughed at if they tried? But they would have as much basis as you do for demanding justice for your sister.”

“That was war,” said Augustus. “As much force was used as was needed. But this—this was different. This was torture.”

“And if an Auror used the Cruciatus Curse on an innocent person?” Harry widened his eyes. “That wasn’t torture, Mr. Starrise? Explain the difference to me, please.”

“You will never understand,” said Augustus, appearing to swell, “because you are not of the Light.”

Harry laughed. It was a sharp sound, and he saw it make people flinch like the crack of a whip. “Nor will I be,” he said. “I am loyal to neither the principles of Dark nor of Light, because there are always times when that loyalty becomes slavish. I will choose from day to day, Mr. Starrise, and make sure that those choices march with my own principles. It’s a considerably more frightening existence than a blind decision for Dark or Light, so I can see why not many wizards choose it. But it is what I am. Perhaps you should have questioned that more closely before you entered the alliance.”

He met the eyes of the people in front of him, and saw stunned expressions on some faces, and understanding ones on others. Perhaps they finally understand now why I'm not a bloody fucking Lord.

He sprang from the tabletop and turned towards Augustus with a sarcastic bow. "I believe that you have a duel with Mr. Bulstrode in five minutes," he said. "Far be it from me to keep you from it."

Lucius tapped his wand against his hip as he watched Adalrico and Starrise move towards the center of the large clear space of grass where they would be dueling. His mind could step back from the drama of the fight to see how Harry's words applied to him, as it always could.

Harry had said he would tolerate no torture done in vengeance.

That meant he could never be allowed to find out what Lucius had done to Lily and James Potter, lest it meant that the Malfoys would not have their chance at political power. Harry might even break off the joining with Draco. Lucius was not entirely sure of that, how strong his love for Draco was in comparison to his principles, but it was a possibility.

Lucius had taken steps he thought were sufficient at the time to insure Harry would never find out. But his contacts at the Ministry had since informed him that Fiona Mallory, the Auror who'd taken the fall for his vengeance, had been sacked for her actions. She was living somewhere in London, doing Merlin knew what.

Perhaps it is time to make sure that one of those things is not confessing my part in the torment of Harry's parents.

Lucius nodded sharply before he turned to watch the duel. Something to attend to when this was done with, then.

Augustus shook off the last of his irritation as he walked to the center of the grass. Harry was right—at least, if he really believed the rubbish he had been spouting. He should not have joined the alliance. Harry was not the right leader for someone of Augustus Starrise's principles if he could not even see that of course vengeance in a situation like this was justice.

He turned to face Adalrico Bulstrode, who had walked out to stand opposite him. The air began to shimmer with the colors of gold and silver and bronze and iron, the four metals they had called upon to witness the duel. The shimmer spread out around them, forming a hazy, round wall of light. Neither of them would be able to cross that barrier until one of them was dead, and no one from outside could interfere. Augustus had called Bulstrode to a place beyond the reach of the wizarding world, and here it was.

Augustus took a deep breath. The air was sharp around him, the colors carving lines into his eyes and his brain. This was the end of life, the end of days, the end of the aching and the hurting.

Bulstrode stared at him, dark-eyed and dark-haired, heavy as the black stone that his ancestors had chosen as their sigil. Augustus wondered if his sister had seen him like that in her last moments on earth.

He felt an answering spark from his staff that seemed to say she had, though, Augustus thought, without the fear that showed in his eyes now.

He held his staff out in front of him, and bowed to his opponent. The duel's code said he had to. Bulstrode bowed stiffly back, clearly uncomfortable with the gestures of honor. Augustus smiled. He was no duelist. He was no duelist, and the morning around them was gray and green and brown with spring, and any moment now, Alba would be avenged.

Both of them knew the moment to begin. The wall of light told them, the morning told them, the tension between them—between executioner and criminal, Augustus thought, between Light wizard and Dark wizard—told them.

Bulstrode flicked his wand, and, of course, a Dark Arts defense spell came spilling out. "Defensor vindictae!"

Black mist filled the dueling ring, a fist opening in the middle of it. Augustus knew the fist would seize him and crush him if he wasn't careful. He also knew it would never have the chance to touch him.

"Finite Incantatem," he said, loudly and calmly, and the mist dissipated. He was already into his next spell, a step ahead of Bulstrode, who had thought he would have a moment more behind his Dark shield. Augustus heard his own voice incanting, and the stumbling words of his opponent.

"Aspectus ignis!"

"Ardesco!"

Augustus concentrated on the fire that Bulstrode had tried to light within him, and murmured Finite Incantatem over and over, drawing on the power that he'd stored in the staff. The fire went out, and he looked up, expecting to see Bulstrode stumbling. After all, the Fire Sight spell tended to do that, effectively blinding an opponent by making him see the heat that burned inside every object.

But Bulstrode had closed his eyes, and was fighting blind. He shouted the next spell with a note of triumph in his voice that Augustus didn't understand, unless it was delight in using the Darkest spell he could think of. "Cogo!"

The Compression Curse struck Augustus before he was ready—he had always underestimated how fast that one moved—and he felt pain crumpling his shoulders, shoving his spine into his buttocks, trying to make him bow his head so that it could crumple him. But they did not know Augustus Starrise, neither the original creator of this spell nor Adalrico Bulstrode. He would never bow his head. He bore up under it, and even cast a nonverbal Shield Charm to protect himself from the next spell, and only then reached out to the power in the staff again to end the curse.

Bulstrode was at work, too. The glow of Shield Charms moved around him when Augustus next looked, and a black spark he wasn't familiar with. Bulstrode thrust a fist forward with a wordless cry, and ebony fire galloped from his hand, heading straight for Augustus.

It ate through the Shield Charm as if it wasn't there, and struck his left hand, not the one that gripped the staff. Augustus looked down at the sudden lack of feeling. His arm had turned to stone from the fingers to the elbow.

There was a moment when he might have panicked. He forced the panic away. This is for Alba.

He threw himself sideways from the next rush of black fire, knowing it must be one of the Bulstrode magical gifts. Most Light families let others know what they could do, speaking in honesty, walking in the daylight. Dark families kept them secret so their enemies wouldn't know exactly what they might do in battle. Paranoid bastards.

And these are the kinds of people Harry would ally himself with. I was right. This alliance was wrong for me.

Dragging the stone limb, he concentrated on himself, and cast *Exsurgo*. Strength raced through him like a river in flood, like the Light in the ritual he'd used on Midwinter—and he didn't have to feel sorry about that, because they'd been doing it to battle the Dark, not to aid Harry—and gave him the ability to stand up straight and renew the Fire Sight spell. Bulstrode had just opened his eyes, but he slammed them shut again, with what Augustus thought was a little whimper.

Augustus knew he could still win. It was a matter of finding a Light spell that would eat through Bulstrode's strong shields and kill him. He knew the other man was stronger than he was, magically, but that didn't matter right now, when he was also blinded and reduced to relying on his family gifts to grant him an advantage.

Alba's voice whispered restlessly in his head. You can do it, brother. Remember the spell that you used when the Death Eaters tried to raid our house in the First War.

Augustus smiled. Yes, that would do.

“Lux aeterna!” he cried, throwing his hand and what he could move of his left arm wide, and pouring all his will down the staff, as if it were a river forced through a narrow course.

Light exploded around him, a burning sunrise, a killing radiance. He knew it would first blind Bulstrode and then hollow him out and then consume him with fire. It was fatal only to wizards who used Dark Arts, and Bulstrode had surely used enough of them to fall victim to it.

It is right that he die of the Light, Augustus thought, and opened his eyes, and watched eagerly. He could see through the radiance, though no one who used Dark Arts would be able to.

He saw the Light stalk towards Bulstrode. He saw him fall before it like a sacrifice on a pyre. Augustus opened his mouth to laugh.

And Bulstrode whispered back, “Obscuritas aeterna.”

He should not have been able to remember the counterspell at such a time. He should not have been able to concentrate on it when he was blinded and in such a position that he could only react defensively, Augustus thought. But darkness rose around him, and spread forward, and met the Light in mid-flight. Darkness and Light coiled and whipped and became a black-and-gold maelstrom that it hurt Augustus to look upon. Then they faded and were gone.

Bulstrode unleashed another stream of the black fire, and Augustus’s right leg was suddenly heavy and useless.

That was when he knew he was going to die.

Madness stirred in him. He could not die and allow Alba’s murderer and rapist to go unpunished. He could bear death, he could bear how long his justice quest had taken him, but never that.

So he pulled his magic into himself—all of his magic, including that stored in his staff. He concentrated deep, and heard the voice of the tutor talking to him and Alba, telling them legends, telling them old stories. Perhaps the particular story that came to him did so because

of the round table that Harry had constructed; he did not know. Perhaps it was his sister's inspiration. But, either way, it was perfect.

He dropped his shields. He left himself utterly vulnerable to that black fire. And before it came again, he whispered, "Ulcer regis piscatori!"

The spell wrenched itself out of him. Augustus could feel his insides convulsing as he gave up his being to the curse, his magic and his purpose in life. His sister was with him in that moment, moving with him, speaking the words she had been unable to speak in life because they had taken her wand from her before they began torturing her, of course they had.

Augustus knew the curse had flown and hit Bulstrode. He gave a deep sigh, contentment consuming him before the fire turned him into a stone statue. It was done. He had at least taken vengeance for Alba before his death, and Pharos would know what to do in his absence.

And then he was with Alba, and everything was well again.

Harry didn't at first realize what had happened to Adalrico, because he was busy staring at Augustus, turned to a bizarre mixed figure of stone and flesh. The black fire had hit his head, killing him, but his torso, his right arm, and his left leg were still alive. Harry gave a shudder and turned away. The duel had been swift, but still he felt the waste of life lying in his body like a stone limb of his own.

"Harry!"

He turned back swiftly. The barrier around Augustus and Adalrico had vanished with the ending of the duel, and Millicent was kneeling next to her father. It was her voice that had cried out, so angry and fearful and lost that Harry hadn't recognized it at first. He strode forward and knelt next to her.

"What is it?" he asked, and then saw the seeping wound on Adalrico's heel and heard his soft, pained breaths.

"I tried to heal it," said Millicent, her fingers closing around her wand and then letting it go again. "I did. But I can't. What is it? What curse

is this, Harry? It's hurting him." She gazed up at him as if he could make everything better.

Harry swallowed. He couldn't make everything better, and this was one of those things. "I'm sorry, Millicent," he said softly. "It's the Fisher King Curse. It inflicts a wound that doesn't heal. The only person who can cure it is the person who cast it." He led her gaze to Augustus.

"But that—that doesn't make sense," Millicent whispered. "I mean, you're a Lord-level wizard. You should be able to reverse it."

Harry shook his head. "This is one of those times where pure power doesn't do anything," he said, and gently moved his hand over Adalrico's face, fearing him blinded. It was just the Fire Sight spell, though; the pain in his ankle was distracting him from ending it. Harry ended it, and nodded to Adalrico as his eyes flicked open. "It's like someone gone insane from the Cruciatus Curse, Millicent. I can't bring back Neville's parents, no matter how powerful I am. And I can't heal this. It doesn't kill, but it is part of the laws of magic that only the caster can reverse it. And I wasn't the caster. I'm sorry," he added, feeling the words inadequate in the face of Millicent's stare.

"He's right, daughter," Adalrico said, his voice exhausted. "In the end, he wanted to cost me some pain more than he wanted to live. I felt his shields drop when I attacked. He poured everything he had into this curse, knowing I would kill him a moment later." He pressed Harry's hand hard enough to hurt. "I do not blame you. Leave us for a moment, Harry. I have to speak to Millicent."

Harry nodded, and stood, backing away as Elfrida hurried up to her husband and daughter with Marian in her arms. "I'm glad you're alive, sir," he murmured.

"So am I," said Adalrico, in a voice that was already learning to beat back the pain. "I still have a chance to change."

Harry had to turn away then, partly from the truth of the words and partly so Elfrida could have some privacy as she knelt beside her husband and embraced him. He had to breathe in sharply several

times, before he shook his head and met Draco and Snape's gazes with a tiny nod. He was all right.

He was even more confirmed in his prejudices against vengeance, though.

The cost is too high. Always too high. I'll do what I must to win the war and what I can to alleviate the pain of others, but vengeance is not something I can commit, not a wound I can inflict on my soul. No more. No longer.

Intermission: After the Duel

“No, to the side. Now try me.”

“Expelliarmus!”

Millicent caught her breath as she watched her father lunge out of the way of her spell, and land heavily in the dirt under their tent. Adalrico had insisted on removing the charms that protected them from the rough, wet ground, so that he could get used to walking on different kinds of surfaces with his wounded ankle. Now he stood up, grimacing, and flexed his foot. The bandages around it were already unraveling, but he tightened them again with a muttered charm and faced her.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” he demanded. “You should have attacked me while I was down, daughter. None of this fair play nonsense, if you please, or I shall think you’ve been spending too long around Gryffindors.”

With a breathless laugh, Millicent obliged, and dueled further with her father, helping him to test the limits the wound had put on his life. Elfrida sat in a corner of the tent with Marian, and held her, and smiled like the stars.

Millicent had come to accept that the Fisher King Curse couldn’t be healed, mostly because Adalrico himself seemed so accepting. The wound was permanent. It wouldn’t heal, and if Adalrico removed the skin where it had taken root, or even his whole foot, it would only move up his leg and fester there. The important thing was to keep it clean and wrapped so it wouldn’t stink, drink plenty of Blood-Replenishing Potion from now on, and learn to know what movements he could make without pain and which he couldn’t.

It was a small price, considering he might have paid with his life, though Millicent still found herself unsatisfied. She would have liked vengeance against Starrise. But Adalrico had seen the thoughts written on her face and shaken his head at her.

“Do not, daughter,” he’d said softly. “You heard what Harry said. He means it. No seeking vengeance against Starrise.”

“They’re not part of the alliance anymore,” said Millicent. Harry had come to their tent an hour ago, to see how Adalrico was, and to share the owl he’d received from Pharos Starrise. Apparently, in the event of his uncle’s death, Augustus had instructed him not to ally with Harry, and to keep the linchpin from him by any means possible. “We could attack them.” She’d murmured those words directly after Harry had left, and still her father shook his head, that stubborn, dark expression fastened into place.

“Pharos Starrise is not part of the alliance any more, but Tybalt Starrise still is,” said Adalrico. “Attack his brother, and we would be obeying the letter of Harry’s words while disobeying the spirit. I won’t have that said of us ever again, Millicent. Once, I followed a Lord I had to be ashamed to own when I wasn’t doing exactly what he wanted. Now, I follow a leader I can be proud of, and that means doing what he asks of me, even when it’s hard.”

Millicent had nodded, reluctantly, and then they’d returned to their dueling practice. Now Adalrico stood, bowed to her, and then limped across to her mother, who lifted her face to be kissed.

Millicent slipped out of the tent as she had the night before, but this time, her gaze fixed on the moon and stars was much happier than it had been. She had also been alone then, and she wasn’t now. Catching a faint movement off to the side, she whirled around and lifted her wand.

Pierre Delacour moved a step forwards, raising his hands with a slight smirk. “My lady,” he said. “I can approach you without triggering your defensive reflexes, no?”

“You can,” said Millicent, lowering her wand and studying him carefully. “But I did not think you would ever wish to approach me again, after what you have heard about my father.”

“My lady, your father survived a duel,” said Pierre. “I am not sure why this strange country is so without honor, but in mine, we can put aside

wounds when the duel is done. That is the way of it. That is what all duels were meant to do in the past, to satisfy honor.” He claimed her hand and brushed his lips over her knuckles. “And I find myself more than satisfied in the beauty of the winner’s daughter.”

Millicent knew he was flattering her—she wasn’t beautiful—but that he was willing to flatter her said a great deal. She laid a hand on the side of his face and said, “My father did grant me permission to marry you if he’d died in the duel.”

“Did he?” Pierre cocked his head, eyes intent on her face.

“He did,” Millicent confirmed. “Therefore, it’s not entirely inappropriate if I do this.” She leaned forward and kissed him on the lips.

Pierre stiffened in surprise for just a moment, then kissed her back, and stepped away with a soft smile of appreciation. “Thank you, my lady,” he murmured. “If you were a shy and fainting maiden—”

“Then you would not have approached me at all,” Millicent retorted, and nodded towards the entrance of the Bulstrode tent. “Shall we go inside and see what my father has to say about this, since he’s still alive?”

“That doesn’t make sense?” Laura Gloryflower sounded concerned, her eyebrows rising. “But it is supposed to make sense, vates. I assure you, all the northern families but Starrise are agreed on this.”

Harry forced himself to relax and sit still on his stool. Laura had shown up with such splendor—not only attired in formal robes adorned with her family crest, but with an artificial golden cat at her side—that he felt as if he should have received her in grander surroundings. Now, he could admit that staying in the Black tent might have been a good idea. “I suppose it does make sense,” he said. “I just didn’t expect it, ma’am. I thought for certain you would follow Starrise in denying me the linchpins. I had seen that many of the northern families did whatever he told them.”

Laura shrugged. “That was Augustus. Pharos has been in the shadow of his uncle for so long that very few of us have had the

chance to know him for himself. I know him better than most, and I don't like what I see. Pharos is a follower, not a leader. That was the core of the conflict between Tybalt and Augustus, you know," she added. "Both were leaders, and Tybalt could not endure the kind of confinement Pharos accepted. But Starrise will pay for it now. Augustus has the heir he wanted, but Pharos is already looking for the guidance that he misses.

"The other part of it, Harry, is that this was a duel. If we broke apart from you now, or denied what we promised you before the duel began simply because a Dark wizard won, then we are saying such rituals are worthless to us. A duel matters—but only if the person we think should have the victory wins?" Laura snorted and shook her head. "Any true Light wizard is worth more than that, Harry, I would hope. I'm sure Augustus didn't intend to, but he did you a favor. You were bound to accept the result, and that binds us to accept it, too."

Harry blinked and ran his hand through his hair. "Then I have all the linchpins except Starrise," he said. "I—thank you, Mrs. Gloryflower. I still didn't expect it, though it's starting to sound as if I should have."

Laura's lips wrinkled in a small smile. "Perhaps when you come to understand Light wizards better, Harry, you will learn to expect such things," she murmured. She stood and considered him for a moment, then added, "There are some of your Light allies who are a bit concerned that your guardian, your future joined partner, the person whose heir you are, and most of your closest allies are all Dark wizards."

"And my brother's Declared for Light," said Harry firmly. "And I count the Weasleys and many other Light children in Hogwarts as friends. And I need the support of the Light families to take out the linchpins. I appreciate the concern, Mrs. Gloryflower, and thank you for telling me of it. But I don't intend to change matters in my personal life to suit my allies' whim."

Laura laughed in delight, and the cat beside her sat up and clapped its paws with a soft ringing sound. "I appreciate the honesty, Harry," she said. "And I can sway most of the others to seeing things your way, I'm sure."

“You’re their leader now, aren’t you?” Harry asked. “Now that Augustus is dead, they’re looking to you.”

Laura dipped her head. “Harry, whatever gave you that idea?”

He just looked at her, and she laughed again. “I am the most determined of them,” she said. “And that has always counted for a great deal in our world, more than magical strength; Augustus was not as powerful a wizard as Gloriana Griffinsnest, for example, but he had more of an idea of what to do with his power.” She paused for a moment, then added contemplatively, “And I think it will benefit your alliance, Harry. After all, I wish the rights of werewolves to be extended, too, now that my niece is one. I will try to persuade the others to see things the same way.”

“Thank you,” said Harry softly. Laura nodded.

“There is one more thing I wanted to tell you, a gift that only I can give you,” said Laura. “I understand that you may be joining battle soon.”

Harry nodded, his mind flashing to Midsummer and what he would try to do there. Some pieces of the plan were already in place—for example, the centaurs’ participation and the fact that he would have to find some way to cleanse the tainted magic in the stone—but others were floating, awaiting confirmation of certain reports.

“Allow me to offer you some artificial animals,” said Laura. “My family is small enough that our fighting alone would not turn the tide of battle, but some of our golden or jeweled creations might.” She smiled down at the cat beside her, and touched the realistic-looking tufts of golden fur that grew from between the ears. “What kind would most help you? Horses? Unicorns? Cats? Dogs?”

If I’m right, then we’ll need to move swiftly on the battlefield, and attacking from above and underneath wouldn’t be a bad idea, either. “Horses,” Harry said firmly. “And anything you have that flies or burrows underground.”

Laura laughed again. "Then we can get rid of a prototype that one of my ancestors created and which has been gathering dust ever since," she said. "I will send you their specifications in a few weeks' time, Harry. Until then." She inclined her head and stepped out of the tent, the cat padding beside her.

Harry stretched his arms above his head and yawned. Snape had gone off for a private discussion with Regulus, and told Harry not to wait up. In fact, Harry was fairly sure that Snape had thought he would go to bed by now. But Harry had had to visit the Bulstrodes, read Pharos's letter, and have discussions with a few of his allies, including Laura, which had filled him with tentative determination. Most of them weren't going to be torn apart from him by this duel—

If—and that reminder always lingered in the back of their voices—Harry really did enforce the standards he'd spoken of. If he allowed his Dark allies to get away with things that he wouldn't allow his Light allies, then bad things would happen.

He was just turning for bed when the tent entrance rustled. John Smythe-Blyton was standing there when Harry faced it again, and he spoke at once in a hushed, excited voice.

"Tybalt can't be seen coming near you right now," he whispered. "It would be disrespectful to his uncle's memory, since the new head of the family has decided that he wants nothing to do with you."

Harry nodded, having expected that.

"But Tybalt wants you to know that he's still loyal to you," said John. His dark eyes shone in the firelight. Harry wondered if it was defying the family that had so despised him, or just the sneaking around and delivering of secret messages, that made him so excited. "He's going to do what he can to restore the linchpin to your control. And he says it's a good thing now that you didn't persuade Augustus to change the means of inheritance." He laughed, quietly, and then dipped his head to Harry and ducked out of the tent.

Harry paused, thinking about that. The linchpins were linked to the earth, yes, but also to a family. If he had not rejected his last name,

then Lux Aeterna and the house at Godric's Hollow would have passed to him when James was stripped of his magic, because he was the elder son and of Potter blood. With the Black legacy, though, Regulus had had to choose the person he wanted to leave the inheritance to, and Sirius had been formally disowned and then reinstated with the help of Dumbledore's spell. There was no sharing of the property in common.

That was the major difference Harry could think of. He wasn't sure how it would help Tybalt keep the linchpin, though.

He shook his head, and sought his bed. He was tired, and if the events of the evening had strengthened him, the events of the morning had embittered him. He knew he would see the flesh-and-stone statue that Augustus had become in his dreams.

"You should tell him."

Regulus stood in the entrance of the Black tent, looking into the sky. Snape concealed a snort in his hand. He knew what Regulus was doing: watching the stars, the way those of his family tended to do in times of great crisis. Or maybe that was just Regulus. Certainly Snape remembered seeing him do it in their Death Eater days.

"You're a fine one to talk, Severus," his friend said, without looking over his shoulder. "Since you kept so many things from Harry for his own good, that you'd be turning his parents in not least among them."

Snape scowled and said nothing. That had been for Harry's own good, so that he wouldn't stop Snape and try to keep his parents and Dumbledore free. Regulus's secret was based on shame, from what he'd said, and shame was nothing Harry could not forgive.

"Besides," Regulus added then, "I'm going to tell him in a few days."

Snape fought to keep his jaw shut. At last he said, "And you're still not going to tell me, I suppose?"

Regulus's shoulders hunched. "...no. Please don't ask me, Severus. Telling you why would involve telling you the secret."

Snape bowed coldly and swept out of the tent, cursing his bad leg that wouldn't let him make as dramatic an exit as he liked; his robes swirled once and then dropped like a wounded bat behind him. He made his way back to his own tent, now and then studying the sky. He couldn't read whatever message Regulus had seen written in the stars, though, no matter how long he looked.

It was better looking than admitting he was jealous of Harry for receiving Regulus's confidence.

And it was better than the imaginary vision of a bottomless pit he could see opening under his feet. This alliance had not ended on the settled note Snape had thought it would. They all seemed to be hurtling forward faster than he would like, a fall that might end on Midsummer Day, or never.

Chapter Seventy-Five: Regulus's Shame

"Ouch!"

Harry shook his head and tried not to laugh as Draco went sliding off his bed, hitting his temple on top of the mental hurt he'd taken. He slid off his own and extended a hand, only to be stopped by the boundary of the rune circle Draco had drawn to keep his body safe while he was possessing Harry. "Are you all right?" he asked, when Draco picked himself up off the carpet and glared at him.

"You didn't say that you were going to do that," Draco snapped, shaking out his robes. He felt the side of his head and winced, and part of Harry's amusement melted.

"I am sorry," he said, and then visions of what worse wounds Draco could take on Midsummer Day touched him. "But if you can't ride out a Legilimency attack while you're possessing someone else, then I think this plan isn't going to work."

Draco looked up at once. "And who else would help you, you idiot?" he muttered, his fingers still on the lump on the side of his head. "Unless you have a centaur who can possess people waiting in the wings..."

Harry shook his head. "I didn't mean it that way, Draco. But you know that everything has to work for this plan to succeed. If you can't possess me while I use Legilimency on you, then that's not a bad reflection on you, but I'll have to find some other way to accomplish what I want. Because you're right. I have no one else who can play the role that you do in the battle."

Draco glanced up quickly. "That sounds as if you mean more than just a person who can possess people, Harry."

"I do." Draco had been like this since the meeting on the equinox and the announcement of their joining. At certain moments, he would demand evidence that he was important to Harry, and for more reasons than just battle tactics. Harry held his eyes, not smiling. "I need you there when this battle begins, Draco, for moral support and

because I can't imagine pulling off something like this without you. I'm hoping to defang Voldemort and destroy most of the Death Eaters and show the wizarding world that the magical creatures can fight beside us and free the northern goblins all on the same day. If you weren't there, I would fail, simply because I wouldn't trust my own strength."

Smirking, satisfied, Draco nodded and stood. "Then I'll work on this some more," he said. "Just let me retrieve my wand and heal this wound first."

Harry nodded, and waited. He could wait, he told himself. It was only the beginning of April; they still had almost three whole months before Midsummer arrived and there was no more time to practice. He had no reason to feel as if impatience were gripping him by the throat and driving spurs into his sides.

But he did. And when he and Draco were finished here, then he had something else to study.

Zacharias Smith had never been so insulted in his life. Really, who did Harry think he was, asking a question like that?

Well, he thinks he's a vates and incipient Lord, and he's probably right, the voice of his training answered him, and Zacharias had to admit he was correct. But he still did not have to be so insulting.

"Of course I can ride, and of course I can ride more than brooms," he told Harry stiffly. "And no, before you ask, I have some experience with ordinary horses, too, not just winged ones. My family raised me properly, Harry. Light wizarding families once did a great deal of their fighting from horseback, you know."

He stifled the temptation to ask why Harry was smiling like that. Besides, in a moment the smile went away, and Harry nodded gravely. "Who are the other good riders in the school? Do you know?"

Zacharias sniffed. "Of course, Harry. The Smiths weren't the only pureblood families who patronized the institutions I attended before Hogwarts, you know. I know the best riders in Ravenclaw and

Hufflepuff, and I can make a good guess about the Gryffindors—at least, if they’ve kept up their skills.” He glanced around, but though there were more than a few people lingering in the latest abandoned classroom where they’d held the dueling club, there were no other Slytherins. That meant he was free to add, “And you can ask about your own House. I had little contact with Dark families as I was growing up. My mother didn’t think it proper.”

“Your mother sounds a formidable woman,” Harry mused.

“She is,” said Zacharias unrepentantly. His mother had largely raised him; while his father was the one who’d taught him skills like riding a broom and some of his earliest spells, his mother had passed along the Smith family traditions to him, and taken him to attend sessions of the Wizengamot, and sent him to be instructed in riding and other necessary means of claiming his title. “I’ll tell her you said so. She’ll take it as a great compliment.”

Harry nodded. “So you’d be willing to go forth into battle on Midsummer Day, then? Riding?”

Zacharias felt a great surge of satisfaction. He would never be so rude as to show it—one thing pureblood Light heirs did not do was complain about petty things—but he had resented the fact that the Slytherins and his Dark allies received so much attention from Harry. He had attended the alliance meeting, of course, but Harry had paid him almost no personal attention. He supposed Harry felt sure of the Smiths’ support, while he needed to spend some more time on securing those uncertain allies who still wavered, but he had fumed about it all the same. “Being felt sure of” had felt an awful lot like “being taken for granted.”

And now here was personal attention, and he hadn’t even had to complain to receive it. Harry had or was going to have horses for the battle, and he had, quite sensibly, thought that Zacharias, as a pureblood Light wizard, would know how to ride. He wasn’t going to insist on leading the riders himself, which Zacharias was privately grateful for. Harry might be unsurpassed on a broom, maybe even on a dragon, but he’d shown no sign of skill on horseback.

That Harry was asking for help soothed another fear that Zacharias's mother had voiced to him: that this was a leader who did not know how to delegate. Obviously, he was learning.

"I would be honored," said Zacharias, when he realized that some moments had passed and he hadn't given an answer to Harry's question. "And I'll start approaching some of the other good riders. I know that Chang would be willing to give up her life, at least, and as she owes you a life debt, that's quite proper, but others will need to ask permission of their parents."

Harry nodded. "I know it sounds strange," he said, "sending children to battle against a Dark Lord and his Death Eaters. And if their parents are good riders who would rather go into battle instead, then I'll be happy to have them. But others—I don't know if I have enough time to bring other people I trust into this alliance, get them to trust me, and then insure that they can ride well enough to go forth into battle."

"I am not a child, Harry, at least," said Zacharias stiffly. "Remember that my family keeps the old age of majority, at fifteen."

Harry actually swept him a little bow. "I did forget. My apologies."

Zacharias relaxed. "The horses are a new addition to your plans, aren't they?" At Harry's nod, he added, "I can ask my mother if she'd be willing to participate, though I'm almost sure she will be."

"Thank you," Harry said, and then he grinned, and then he was gone. Zacharias felt relaxed and elated for a long time after he left. When Harry wasn't on the brink of losing his temper and thrashing someone else to death, then he did make an inspiring sight. Zacharias would be happy to ride for him.

He got a firecall from his mother that evening. Miriam Smith was more than willing to go into battle, if her son called her.

Zacharias went to bed thinking that all was right with the world, since his day had also included a kiss from Hermione, and his confounding her with a pureblood ritual she didn't know.

Harry turned the sheathed knife over in his hand thoughtfully. He had started looking through the gifts he had received—from Lucius in the truce-dance and from his allies for Christmas and his birthday—and had found one that might be perfect for his plans.

He drew the knife from the sheath on a sudden whim, and held it up to the light that came from the lamp on his bedside table. The blade glittered at him, a sharp golden contrast to the dark hilt. Adalrico had given the blade to him for the Christmas in which Harry and Lucius had concluded their truce-dance, and the words he had spoken about it still rang in Harry's mind.

One of my ancestors fell in love with a Lady of the Light. But she would not have him, which is not surprising, since he was Declared Dark and had aided the Dark Lord that Lady defeated. He created this knife to symbolize what he could not have. The hilt is forged of the same rock that makes up Blackstone's walls. The knife blade is sunlight that he captured on a Midsummer evening—the last ray as the sun sank beneath the horizon on the day of longest light.

Harry half-wished he had remembered this blade last year. Then he could have used, it perhaps, to fend off the loss of his hand.

Or could he have? Voldemort's power at the moment of sunset on Midsummer last year had been absolute. He might only have bound Harry as he already had and then taken the knife. Harry shuddered to think of it in Voldemort's hands. Perhaps it wouldn't have aided him—Adalrico had said that the knife's Light blade was unhappy in the hands of a Dark family like the Bulstrodes, so it would probably have been even unhappier with the actual Dark Lord—but he could have corrupted it, broken it, found a use for it. Harry was now confident that Voldemort could find a use for everything, even those objects he ought to most despise. He'd break them down into their component parts and soil them, drain them for their magic, if he couldn't do anything else.

Now, though, it would probably be the perfect tool to aid him for a moment on Midsummer that Harry was rather nervous about.

He tossed the knife in the air and tried to catch it, cursing mildly as it spun through his fingers and onto the floor. He slid it back into its sheath and laid it across his lap, then muttered, "Here goes nothing," as he took out the stone from his robe pocket that contained the tainted magic.

It felt warm to his hand, and the tainted magic chose to manifest as a whisper in his head. Now it sounded like Voldemort's voice, now like Dumbledore's. Just now, it had adopted a warm, grandfatherly tone.

You could free me, you know. I would obey your will from now on, and only yours. I promise. I am tired of being cooped up in here. I want to be free. I would let you use me as you willed. Imagine yourself, more powerful than your mentor, more powerful than your magical ancestor.

Harry shook his head. He wondered if the magic's lack of imagination in tempting him was due to the Lords it had come from, or the fact that it just didn't understand him. It should have spoken about the good he could do, if it wanted him to free it. Power for its own sake repelled Harry. What in the world would he do with it? It was what he could use magic for that mattered to him.

He lay back on his bed, cradling the stone in his hand and staring at it. The knife shifted position, and he rolled over so that it slid onto the bed and couldn't stab him. He would not have a better chance than this for cleansing the magic, he thought. Blaise had had an argument with Ginny and was currently sulking in the library, and Draco was serving a detention with McGonagall for cheek. Just because he was Harry's boyfriend didn't give him the right to Transfigure teapots into tabby cats biting their own arses, as he'd found out.

Harry closed his eyes. He had thought of a way to do this that might work, if only by example. The phoenix web Lily and Dumbledore had placed in his mind had been supposed to strain impurities out of his magic. Harry doubted that had worked the way they thought, but phoenix fire was a symbol of purity. Perhaps he could use his own fire to burn out the soiled magic and leave behind the clean material.

Perhaps.

Harry took a deep breath and called the phoenix fire, concentrating on the shape of the flame. When he opened his eyes, he was looking through a haze of blue. Luckily, he'd already fire-proofed his bed and his curtains—easy enough to do without Draco and Blaise noticing, since Harry always cast his own cleaning charms on his bed anyway, refusing to let the house elves do the work.

He held up the stone in front of his face, wondering if it was his imagination that its warmth had increased since he called the phoenix fire. Then he passed the fire through the stone.

The shock was sharp, grinding, twisting, as if the knife had managed to stab him after all, and had gone straight into his belly. Harry gasped and curled up around himself, but continued forcing the flame into the rock. It felt as if he were burning the bones of the earth, or slowly changing them from stone to wood. Should it be this hard to burn something?

The impurities were catching fire. But as they did, they tried to recoil, flee for their existence, and they took the only escape they could, rushing up through Harry's hand and his arm. It made the snake venom he'd taken from Snape after the Chamber of Secrets seem like a pleasant experience.

Burn! Harry thought, concentrating as hard as he could, bending all his will to that single task. You can't find refuge in me, because I'm burning!

The blue flame sprang higher, and Harry was grateful he'd thought to add the fire-proofing charms to his bed's ceiling, too. Then he lost himself inside a world of pain.

He had expected resistance, not pain, but since he'd begun, he didn't want to stop. He didn't know when he'd have the hours alone to face this again, and now that he knew it was going to hurt, the anticipation would be worse the next time. He poured all his will forward, pushing through curtain after curtain of dirt and disgusting stickiness, oil and morbid heat, rotting flesh and rotting wood. He could do this. He

needed the magic for his plans on Midsummer. That meant he had to burn it clean.

Duty and responsibility pushed him through what he could not have endured for his own sake. And Harry could sense the clean magic slopping free from the stain, and settling quietly into the stone. The purity of it, the sharp imagined scent, lifted up his heart. He could do this. He could do this. He gritted his teeth and pushed the fire more and more, burning the inner defenses. He thought he was about halfway through. Who knew? Once he was halfway through, and had consumed the thick core of slime at the center of the stone, perhaps it would become easier. Or perhaps the greatest push would be saved for the end.

He heard a distant voice shouting, but didn't recognize it. And anyway, he was in no danger of dying, just of pain, and he doubted that anyone could break through the phoenix fire to stop him. He went on pushing, though his arms shook with the effort, and he could feel the pain throbbing in his shoulders. The impurities were shoving further into his body with each minute that passed. He always burned them, and he was sure that he would consume them before they could consume him.

One of his own sheets abruptly wrapped around him, plunging him into darkness, and in the shock, Harry lost his hold on the stone. It fell from his hand. He gasped, then, as the agony in his arms hit him without the ecstasy of the burning to compensate. He rolled over, running his hand up and down the shaking muscles of his left arm.

"Idiot," Draco's voice was saying beyond the blanket, and Snape snarled, a wordless sound of agreement. "Where should we take him?" Draco asked, and Snape murmured something Harry couldn't hear. "No, you're right, Pomfrey probably couldn't handle it," Draco said reluctantly, and then Harry was picked up and carried.

He struggled for a moment. He knew his fire wouldn't hurt the person holding him—Snape, he thought—because of the charms on the blanket, but he resented this. He'd been doing all right. He could get down and walk, and he wanted to make sure the stone and the knife were safe—

And then the pain coiled down from his shoulders and into his chest, now that Harry was no longer concentrating on burning the impurities out of himself. He closed his eyes and called the fire again, intent on cleansing his body, inside and out.

Brief, hot oblivion took him.

“—don’t know what to do to keep this from happening.” That was a voice that it took Harry some time to identify. Then he opened his eyes in startlement, only to see thick cloth directly above him. Peter?

“I’m going to talk to him.” That was Regulus’s voice, sounding exhausted, but determined through the exhaustion. “I don’t have a choice, anyway, and it’s obvious that Severus hasn’t managed to talk him out of this yet, nor my little cousin.”

“I’d like to talk to him myself.”

“All right, then.”

The thick cloth got tugged aside. Harry realized it had been a sheet, and that he was lying in an unfamiliar bed, in the middle of a room that slanted slightly, and seemed made of metal. A faint resonance of magic walked up and down his nerves like fingers, and he realized he must be in Silver-Mirror. Only the pool of fire and the pool of wind, combined with the portraits, could make him feel this way. He sat up, and glanced at the chairs on either side of his bed.

Regulus sat on his right, Peter on his left. Peter smiled at the sight of him, but the expression was harder than Harry remembered seeing on his face since the first night when Peter had introduced himself. Harry stared for a moment. He had the impression that he was seeing the Death Eater side of Peter for the first time. He often saw it in Lucius and Snape, and he had thought it would appear the same in Peter. It didn’t; this was not coldness, but hard, bright, ruthless determination, the resolve to keep going and endure no matter what happened.

He glanced at Regulus, and was alarmed to see that he looked haggard, and was holding his left arm at a short distance from his body. "Why haven't you gone into the picture yet?" he demanded, then coughed. His throat felt hot and dry, as if a scream had been burning inside it.

Regulus waved his wand, and a goblet soared over to Harry. He found that it contained water, which tasted of a faint sweetness. He sniffed a few times, but it didn't have a Calming Draught in it. And really, he thought as he put the goblet down and looked at the two men again, he should know them better than that.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Draco came back after his detention and found you burning," said Peter quietly. "He fetched Snape. He couldn't make you listen to him, but he did get the stone out of your hand and wrap you in the blankets, since he noticed those weren't burning. And then he brought you here."

"Why here?"

"This house is dedicated to fire as well as wind, Harry," said Regulus, stirring from his contemplation of his own arm. "The golden pool was able to wake you from your trance. You'd gone so far into your own phoenix fire that you were in danger of never coming back."

"I didn't know that was possible," said Harry, flinching a bit.

"It is," said Peter. "I suspected it, when I first realized what had happened after Fawkes sacrificed himself. There are old, old legends of people who witnessed a phoenix's rebirth being struck dead by the wonder of it, or mesmerized to the point that they never paid attention to anything else. We know those aren't true from having phoenixes live among us, but you have a phoenix's gifts within you. When we put you in the golden pool, it drew the fire to the surface, and forced it to mingle with its own flames. That freed you from the trance."

Harry wondered for a moment if that meant his own fire was gone now. But a gleam of blue along his arms reassured him.

“What you did, Harry,” Regulus said, his voice empty and distant and sad, “was an extraordinarily stupid and selfish thing.”

Harry suppressed his own immediate impulse to snap back. “I didn’t know what was going to happen,” he said quietly, when he had his breathing and his voice under control. “I didn’t even know it would hurt. I thought I could burn the impurities out of the magic in the stone, and all would be well. Phoenix fire purifies.”

“And why didn’t you tell anyone that you intended to do this?” Regulus cocked his head at Harry, his gray eyes gone almost black. “At least Draco and Snape could have been on hand to make sure that you didn’t hurt, or to stop you when the pain began.”

Harry shook his head. “Because I didn’t think it was dangerous.”

“That doesn’t excuse concealing it,” said Peter, frowning. “Even if you thought it needed to be done alone—and I can see why having other people around would be a distraction—then you could have told Draco about it. Or Snape. I’m sure they would have respected you and left you alone if that’s what you wanted, but at least they wouldn’t have been entirely alarmed when they found you on fire.”

Harry bowed his head. “I don’t know,” he said quietly. The decision he’d made seemed cloudy to him now, covered with its own scrim of dirt, like his vision immediately after rescuing Snape from the Chamber of Secrets. “I suppose because I thought they might not leave me alone, that they’d try to stop me.”

“Did you have to do this now?” Regulus asked.

“The time until Midsummer is dwindling,” said Harry. “I thought so, yes.” He met Regulus’s eyes. “Were you waiting for something like this? I thought you were going to go into the picture just a few days after the alliance meeting.”

Regulus sighed and bowed his head. “There are things I needed to tell you,” he whispered. “And it took me until now to work up my courage.” He looked at Peter. “Would you leave, please?”

Peter stood, but his gaze, all compassion when he looked at Regulus, hardened again when he swept it back to Harry. "I still want to talk to you about not having a proper sense of strategy," he said, and walked rapidly up the slanting floor and out of the room. Harry blinked. Is he holding his left arm too? No, just a trick of the way he was moving.

"Harry. There's something I need to tell you."

Regulus's tone was enough to make Harry lose interest in Peter's departure at once. He turned around and waited, locking his arms around his legs in a defensive gesture he hadn't made in a while. He peered at Regulus over the tops of his knees.

Regulus smiled faintly. "You look like Sirius when you do that." Then he closed his eyes, and began to speak without much transition.

"The pictures here in Silver-Mirror lead to different places, Harry, I told you that. I didn't tell you that I went into one of them when I was sixteen. I don't remember the motivation. Raging curiosity, I suppose, or maybe loneliness. Sirius had had his confrontation with our parents by then and run away, and I was still trying to get used to being the only child of my mother and father as well as their formal heir; they'd disowned Sirius the moment they could see straight.

"I chose a painting you may have noticed the last time you were here, one with a crystalline blue door high in a mountain."

Harry concentrated, and did remember seeing such a picture. He nodded.

Regulus opened his eyes. "I wouldn't have been able to tell you this just a few months ago," he said. "For that reason among many others, I'm glad that you've decided to accept the Black legacy, Harry.

"Most of the notes about that picture just said that anyone opening the door would learn something interesting. I opened the door. I can't remember what I expected to find there, either. Maybe the secret to a

riddle, maybe all the answers to the next Transfiguration exam; I was pants at Transfiguration.

“The door gave me a vision of a golden locket marked with the crest of Salazar Slytherin.”

Harry gasped, despite his determination to stay silent and let Regulus tell the story. He recognized the description. That had been the ornament hanging around the neck of the partially transformed Sirius when Harry and Connor had faced him at the end of their third year. It had allowed a bit of Voldemort to possess Sirius, in some way. Harry still hadn't figured out how, and to be honest, he had no desire to. Sirius had fallen victim to the locket because he'd put it on. Harry never intended to be that impetuous.

“Yes,” said Regulus softly. “That one. I didn't know what it meant, at first. The vision showed me that it was hidden in a cave, and what I had to do to get at it. I didn't understand why I would want to. It was protected by Ineri and a—a nasty potion. Why? It wasn't a treasure of our family, so no honor would require me to recover it, and unless we fell on incredibly hard times, I couldn't imagine needing the locket for money. It was something interesting, but only in purely abstract terms.

“I understood better, later. There was a—nasty evening—” Regulus swallowed “—during which I became better acquainted with the Dark Lord, and learned things he probably wouldn't have wanted me to see. But to accomplish the ritual he wished to work, he had no choice but to trust me, and avoid using compulsion or possession or Obliviate, anything that would have threatened my mind or my memory of the event. I suppose he thought the risk small enough. After all, why should I connect the vision of a locket important to him with anything in particular?

“He hadn't known I'd seen that locket before. And if I was a good little Death Eater, I should have told him at once. But I held it secret, first thinking that it could be more useful if I waited, and then deciding that I had to make some attempt to gain that locket, if it was important to him. By then, I hated him.”

Harry was secretly impressed by the flex of Regulus's hands, the shine in his gray eyes. He didn't say anything else about the depth of his hatred. He didn't have to.

"I knew what I had to do to retrieve it, but it was an enormous risk. And there was the fact that retrieving it required me to—kill someone." Regulus pulled at a lock of his thick dark hair. "For a long time, I had nothing that could push me into doing that. I wasn't courageous like Sirius, or I would have gone to Gryffindor. So I hesitated, and waited, and thought that maybe something would happen to make me hate the Dark Lord less than I did.

"Then came Cardiff—"

"Will you please tell me what happened at Cardiff?" Harry surprised himself by asking. "Snape mentioned it to Adalrico Bulstrode, too."

Regulus made a careful motion of his head. "Sorry, Harry. I swore an Unbreakable Vow with Severus and Adalrico. None of us can talk about it unless all three of us agree to do so. And you'll have more luck dragging the secrets of Severus's childhood out of him. But what happened at Cardiff decided me. I had to go and get that fucking locket."

Harry settled back, knowing that he could hardly demand the secret when he'd kept his own, but simultaneously burning and eaten alive with curiosity.

"I suppose you'll laugh, given everything," said Regulus, and his voice had grown thick and heavy with reluctance. "But, by that time, I'd changed my mind about the killing and torture the Death Eaters did. I had my conscience back. I didn't speak out against it—I wasn't that brave—but I avoided it. Severus helped cover for me. I didn't know why at the time. Now I do. He had his own conscience back by then, and was spying for Dumbledore.

"To get past the guards on the locket, I took a Muggle along to the cave, and made him drink the potion, a horrible, horrible thing. He died from it, and it took him hours." Regulus bowed his head, his shoulders shaking. "I knew better by then, I believed it was wrong,

and I did it anyway. That was what I didn't want to tell you, Harry. I sacrificed someone else's life for my own goals. I knew the locket was important to Voldemort, a trophy or a weapon, and I was determined to destroy it because it was the only one of his powerful weapons I knew the exact location of. But I didn't know how it was important, any more than Dumbledore knew exactly how forcing you into the guardian role would enable your brother to defeat the Dark Lord. So I committed the same error he did. You can blame me, hate me if you want. I wouldn't blame you."

Harry sat still for a long moment. "Who was the Muggle?" he asked at last.

Regulus shook his head, not looking up. "Just someone random I snatched off the street," he said. "I didn't even ask for his name."

Harry bowed his head to rest on his knees. "Well, blaming you won't bring him back to life," he said slowly. "And—it's not that I like it, Regulus, and if you did something like that right now I'd be horrified. But I still think it's not on the scale of what Dumbledore did. He sent Peter to Azkaban for twelve years, not even because of what Peter had done, but just to make sure that his tracks were covered. He set the phoenix web on me for nine years, and he never intended for it to be discovered or come off; I have Tom Riddle's possession to thank for the fact that I found it out at all. He molded Connor and my mother, and even my father to a certain extent—and Sirius, of course—to do exactly as he said, to obey and follow his every word. He Obliviated Remus when he made his first rebellion against that. He tortured the people at the Ministry with Capto Horrifer. And those are just the first of his crimes springing to mind. You made a sacrifice, once, and you hated yourself for it. He made them time and again, and he told himself all the while that he was doing right."

"Does that really make it better?" demanded Regulus. From the sound of his voice, Harry had found the edge of a deep pit of self-loathing. "Just because it was one person? And when I didn't even know what the damn thing did? And when it wound up costing my brother his freedom, his sanity, his life?"

Harry cocked his head. "You couldn't have known that would happen to Sirius, Regulus," he said softly. "You can't take on that much responsibility. And I suppose I have to take into account that I like you much better than Dumbledore—" that won him a quick, impossible-to-stifle smile "—and that this crime is old, while I lived through the consequences of many of Dumbledore's. That might be clouding my judgment. But I still think your sacrifice is not something you needed to be ashamed of and hide for this long. I won't think substantially different of you for it. I know the details of Adalrico's torture of Alba Starrise now, and I can accept that he's not the same man he was when he did that. I know one more detail of your Death Eater days, that's all. Though I'd still like to know what happened at Cardiff," he couldn't help adding.

"Ah, Harry," Regulus whispered. "That's the reason I said that your inflicting yourself with phoenix fire was selfish. I don't know what I would do, who I'd rely on, if I lost you." He lunged forward abruptly and caught Harry in a deep hug.

Harry hugged him back, a little stunned, understanding for the first time the depth of emotion that must have made Regulus keep silent about the Muggle's death for so long. He truly had been afraid that Harry would judge him, cast him aside with no chance for absolution. His body shook with relief now, and Harry held him close, running his hand gently down his back.

"Will you go into the picture to heal yourself?" he asked, when Regulus sniffed and drew back from him.

Regulus nodded, with a faint smile. "Yes. I expect to be gone for a while, Harry." He hesitated one more time, then said, "There's no harm in telling you this, now. I'm going to try to figure out what the locket was, exactly. From my viewing of your memories, the diary you destroyed in the Chamber of Secrets was something like it, of the same kind. Voldemort values them highly. I want to know what they are, what it means if we find and destroy them. So I'm going into two pictures, one to heal myself and another that might give me the answer to that question about the weapons."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "You could have done that without telling me the secret of the locket," he said. "What prompted you to confess, Regulus?"

Regulus retained the same faint smile. "You know me too well, Harry," he said. "That second picture is known by some in my family as the execution picture. It's killed people before. The world it leads to offers great treasures of knowledge, but only for a very high price."

"You thought you might die, and you didn't want to die with that weighing on your soul."

Regulus caught his eye. "Yes. And if I died, I wanted you to know why I died, Harry. I don't go to seek these answers lightly. I think they're important. And only the current owner of the Black legacy or his heir can enter the execution picture, and of course you can't go into it, since you're needed here."

Harry swallowed his protest. At least Regulus had told him. And he understood, now, a little better, why Regulus had so badly wanted Harry to be his heir. He now had someone to take care of his houses and the other parts of his legacy if he didn't return.

"All right," he whispered. "I agree."

Regulus smiled more broadly this time. "Thank you, Harry. When I'm out of this world, the houses will consider you their rightful owner, by the way, and you'll appear as Harry Black on the Ministry papers. But that's just an expression; you don't have to take my surname. When I come back, the Black name and the formal ownership will return to me."

Harry heard the plea in his voice, but held firm under the temptation to give in. Just as it was Regulus's choice to risk his life this way, it was Harry's choice to remain free of a family name for the moment. "All right," he said. "Thank you again for telling me."

Regulus hugged him, then, and held him tightly. Harry hugged him back, though he pulled away when he noticed the heat of the infected Dark Mark through the robe.

“Well, go away and heal yourself, then,” he said.

“Thank you, Harry,” Regulus said. “The last two years of my life have been the richest I’ve lived, thanks to you. I wanted you to know that.” He bowed, and then swept out of the room while Harry still sat blinking.

He didn’t notice how many minutes passed before Peter re-entered, carrying the stone filled with the tainted magic and the Midsummer knife. “He’s gone,” said Peter quietly, taking the chair he’d taken before. “He told me good-bye already, when he realized it was time to go.” He put the stone and the knife on the bed, and then leaned forward, his eyes fixed on Harry’s face. “And now we need to talk about strategy.”

“You said that,” Harry muttered. He picked up the stone. He could feel it filled with both pure magic and the taint. The coaxing, whispering voice of the magic in his head was not as strong now, but more deadly, more venomous, and Harry sensed that when he tried to drain the poison again, it would be more concentrated. “I didn’t know what you meant.”

“Well, now you should,” said Peter. “You can’t sacrifice yourself for a short-term advantage, Harry.”

Stung, Harry jerked his eyes up. “The Midsummer plan isn’t like that. It—“

“Might still fail,” said Peter, turning so that he faced Harry in profile, studying him with just one eye, like a carrion bird. “If you hang all your hopes on it, it’s likelier than ever to, because you’ll pour all your concern into it and neglect basic defense. I think you should remember, Harry, that you need to live beyond Midsummer, and your dying there, even to rid the world of Voldemort, is not an acceptable price.”

Harry frowned at him. "You really don't think that my death might be required to kill him?" he asked.

Peter snorted at him. "You forget that you're talking to someone who knows the full prophecy, Harry. It says nothing about that. And even if it comes true three times and chooses a different pair of candidates to fulfill the roles of elder and younger each time, it still doesn't say anything about death. I plan for you to remain alive. I want you to think that way, too."

"I do. I'm making plans for after the war. I'm entering a three-year courting ritual with Draco."

"Those are both wonderful signs," said Peter. "But you still might stumble because of your focus on the short-term. What happens after Midsummer? What's your next plan for fighting him?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "I suppose I might have to concentrate on the weapons that Regulus was talking about, but I don't know if he'll have returned by then." He closed his hand into a fist around the stone. "I don't know if he'll ever return, or when I should count him as dead."

"Two years," said Peter softly. "That's the longest any Black heir remained in the execution picture."

Harry nodded, his throat dry.

"So, you see," Peter went on, his voice implacable, "you'll have to think in the long term, Harry, and be flexible enough to have several plans going at once. Don't halt your vates work while you struggle to defeat Voldemort, and so on. Trust me." For a moment, a smile Harry had never seen before, part sneer and part twisted grin, slid across his face. "I learned to think in the long run while I was in Azkaban. If I'd thought solely of surviving one day and then surviving another, I would have killed myself. So I worked on the phoenix web, and imagined what I would do when I got out, if that ever did happen. I expected my friends to rescue me at first, when Dumbledore was so honored that no one would care about anything he did to secure the world from the Dark Lord, and then I had to adjust my thinking

patterns when they never even came to visit me.” A snarl showed in his voice for a moment, then faded. “So. Adjust your own thinking. Don’t think that the pain you endure has to be alone, or that all of it is an acceptable price for what you might achieve because of it. Delegate. Get help. Tell us what you plan to do.” He caught Harry’s eye. “Remus told me that you’re reaching out to the werewolves. Think of how long they’ve been suffering, Harry, and think that you might be their best hope. Think of what might happen if you die.”

Harry winced. “Isn’t that just forcing myself back into thinking as a sacrifice, though?” he asked. “Of living for other people?”

“Now you’re thinking.” Peter flashed his teeth in a bright, rat-like smile. “Not necessarily, Harry, because I don’t want you to stop living for yourself at the same time. But don’t stop living, please.” His hand came down on Harry’s arm. “I have selfish reasons for asking that, and I have reasons for Regulus’s sake, too. Imagine what would happen if he came back and found you dead.”

Harry shuddered and bowed his head. “All right,” he said. “I’ve started asking for help, but I’ll expand it to asking for help with the phoenix fire, too.”

“Good, Harry.” Peter touched his hand, and then stood up. “Now, I said I’d looked up legends on phoenixes. Why don’t we go to the Black library—excuse me, Your Heirship, your library—“

“Shut up,” Harry muttered, but without much force.

“And start seeing how one controls phoenix fire?” Peter finished cheerfully. “One old legend about phoenixes seems to apply to you. Others might as well.”

It did, Harry had to admit, sound like a better idea than lying around in bed and worrying. He got up and followed Peter to go do some serious study.

Chapter Seventy-Six: Fenrir Greyback's Legacy

Draco was practicing how to move like a shadow.

He'd thought, after the brief surge of hot panic when he'd decided Harry was dying, and then the whispered conference between Regulus and Snape that announced Harry would have to remain at the Black house for a few days, that he'd want to do nothing but sit and brood about his boyfriend. But he'd got bored of that more quickly than he used to do. Draco had leaned back against his pillow, looking so baffled that Blaise evidently had a need to comment on it.

"Manticore got your tongue, Malfoy?" he asked, peering through his bed curtains. Draco refrained from commenting on the mark on his cheek, which looked vaguely as if someone had slapped him. It would make good blackmail material later. Besides, he wanted someone to pay attention to him.

"No," he'd sighed, folding his arms and putting them behind his head. "Just—I used to be able to brood on the wrongs done to me for hours. And now I can't. What's wrong with me?"

Blaise shook his head. "Harry's not here to make you into a little orbiting planet?"

"I notice your lioness isn't here either, though her handprint is," Draco had snarked, good intentions forgotten, and Blaise had scowled at him and ducked back inside his bed. But his remark had made Draco seriously consider whether it was Harry's absence that made him feel differently.

In the end, he'd decided that, no, it wasn't. Since his confirmation as Malfoy magical heir, he'd tried to keep busier, and now it had reached the point where sitting around and brooding on the wrongs done to him felt like a waste. At least his father created plans to avenge those wrongs. If Draco couldn't do that, said this new sensibility of his, he didn't deserve to brood at all.

So he joined the rune circle around his bed together again, and lay back, and closed his eyes, leaping into Blaise's mind—but not to take

over his body. He wanted to see if he could skirt his thoughts like a shadow, move about inside them without Blaise noticing and panicking. That wasn't something he could practice with Harry, even if he'd wanted to; Harry was too sensitive to any change in his mind after all the Legilimency and Occlumency he'd learned and the numerous restructurings he'd done.

He found it was possible to lie like a stone in a river beneath the chattering surface of Blaise's thoughts, his presence nothing more than a gentle ripple of inquiry every now and then. He could access memories if he really wanted them, or, sometimes, tug Blaise's head to look in one direction rather than another. He did that a few times for amusement value, so that Blaise read part of the left page of his Astronomy text over and over, and then rose on smoky wings, padding out of Blaise's head and towards the common room.

He no longer felt the same panic he had when he tumbled free of another person's body. He had learned to relax and open senses he hadn't known he had when he was so focused on possessing a body instead of thoughts. Now Draco let himself follow a pulling line, centered on a sixth-year girl studying by the fire. He settled into her body, and let himself get used to the unfamiliar sensations of breasts, soft genitals, strange chemicals circulating in her bloodstream.

He wondered if he could make her scratch her nose, and what would be the best way to do it. Taking control of her hand and lifting it would alert her that something was wrong at once. But maybe he could make it itch?

Draco thought of her nose becoming red and raw and irritated, twitching the thoughts through her brain, mixing them in with the regular ones. A moment later, the girl gave a grunt of annoyance, reached up her hand, and scratched her nose. Draco ran through her mind like a shadow and on to the next one.

He practiced on most of the Slytherins and grew confident before he allowed himself to venture out of the common room. He turned down the dungeon corridor, and a powerful mind yanked him into another body.

Snape.

Snape was marking Potions essays, a frown on his face as he dashed off sneering remark after sneering remark. His mind constructed the words with such flowing efficiency that Draco couldn't trace the thoughts to their beginning. He settled very carefully into the depths of Snape's mind.

He's a Legilimens. I probably can't possess him without his sensing me. But it would be a wonderful opportunity to practice...

Draco stayed still as Snape went on marking, observing the complicated structure of his mind. Quicksilver pools glittered everywhere that he looked, most of them hiding jagged dark shapes—emotions that Snape didn't want to deal with, Draco surmised, from Harry's description. From this position, Draco could also see layered trap after layered trap, meant to catch and turn the probing of an enemy. And what traps were there that he wasn't seeing? It was a good thing that he'd resisted the temptation to possess him.

But still. It was such a wonderful chance to practice. And Snape might know something was wrong, but not what. He was more likely to think the Dark Lord than he was to think Draco. This was the first time that Draco had ever managed to possess someone without eye contact, after all.

That thought startled and momentarily elated him—his mistake, he guessed later. Those emotions were so foreign to Snape's mind that his thoughts bore down on them at once, trying to guess their source.

Draco found himself whirled around, caught in one of the traps, threaded between its glittering teeth. Snape examined him for a moment, and then he laughed. Draco, spinning, disoriented, couldn't tell if the laughter was in the physical world or the mental one; he only knew it made the trap ring like a banged kettle, and sent him bouncing from wall to wall.

“Draco. I should have known.” Snape’s voice drained and bled cold. “Think before you invade my mind again. If you intend to possess a Legilimens, you will need to be more subtle than that.”

He threw Draco out, as if he were a horse bucking, and Draco found himself drifting aimlessly in midair for a moment. He started to feel for a thread that would bring him to the next mind, and then he was speeding along a corridor, drawn relentlessly by another one. He wondered if he had remained in Snape’s mind so long that only one person was in the common room.

He understood when he found himself settling into Harry as he strode up the stairs to their bedroom. His gift knew this mind, and had brought him back to a familiar place.

Harry sensed him at once, but unprotestingly carried him up the stairs and walked close enough to his bed that Draco could fly to his body. He opened his eyes, rubbed at them, and rolled over to look at Harry.

“You’re back,” he said.

“So pleased you noticed.” Harry sat on his bed and stretched for a moment, then yawned. His face was exhausted, Draco saw, but it bore no trace of burns.

“That was a stupid thing you did,” said Draco, and Harry looked at him with a faint nod.

“Yes, I know,” he said. Draco kept his mouth clamped shut, because otherwise his jaw would dangle, and Malfoys shouldn’t allow themselves to be that startled. “I should have had someone else with me when it began,” said Harry. “Or I should have stopped when I realized that it hurt. I didn’t think it was supposed to hurt. Of course, I didn’t know much of anything about the phoenix fire.” He scooted up the bed until he lay back on the pillow. “That’s cured now.”

Still trying to deal with the fact that Harry had admitted something risky he’d done was a mistake, Draco could only say, “Pardon?”

"I researched phoenix fire in the Black library with Peter," Harry said, and then stifled another yawn. "For hours. I think I'll see the words behind my eyes when I go to sleep." He shut his eyes as if he would go to sleep then and there, and Draco leaned across the gap between their beds. His hand slammed into a barrier, though, and he realized the rune circle protecting his body was still up. He rose and impatiently smudged it away, then poked Harry.

"You don't get to tell me that and then just rest," he pointed out, when Harry opened his eyes again.

"Sorry." Harry gave him a sleepy smile. Draco caught his breath for a moment, then shook his head and fixed Harry with a stern look. "Peter thought that some of the old legends about phoenixes, the human-created ones, might apply to someone human who had phoenix fire and a—voice." Harry grimaced. Draco was about to ask what was wrong, but Harry was plowing on. "It seems they do. I can get mesmerized by my own fire if I'm not careful. And there used to be a tale that you could capture a phoenix chick by luring it with the smell of sweet flowers. Peter tried some on me. It has no effect when the fire doesn't burn, but when it does—" Harry shook his head and snorted. "I'll have to be in one of your rune circles if I want to burn in front of Voldemort, given that he has the Thorn Bitch with him, and she has plenty of flowers."

"Then you aren't planning on using your phoenix fire in battle?" Draco asked.

Harry shook his head again. "I don't think it would be useful. Even Fawkes didn't often burn his opponents, remember? He struck at their eyes, most of the time, or tried small, concentrated blasts of fire. And the way he died was as a sacrifice, consuming himself in his flames, yielding his own immortality. He died as a gateway for the Light, so that it could enter the heart of the Dark storm; it couldn't have done it otherwise." Harry stopped talking and stared into the remote distance for a moment. But though grief salted his voice, it had vanished when he went briskly on. "It would be dangerous to use as a weapon unless I had some idea of how to avoid being mesmerized when the battle is done. As long as I consumed the impurities from the tainted magic in my body, I could keep my mind

on the task. The moment I tried to just call the fire for its own sake, I lost my mind.”

“So Snape and I might actually have done you more harm by interrupting you?” Draco had wondered about that since the time, three nights ago, when he’d come back and found Harry rolling on the bed, burning and screaming.

“Oh.” Harry looked startled. “No, I don’t think so. It did hurt, and Peter said that the fire-pool in Silver-Mirror had to do some healing of its own for me.” He held up his left arm and watched it shake for a moment. “I’ve absorbed two different kinds of venom through this in the last month,” he muttered. “Peter says not to do it any more.”

“That’s good advice,” Draco said quietly.

“Yes, I know.” Harry cocked his head. “And what about you? How did you manage to possess me without making eye contact?”

Draco laughed and began to describe his adventures, though he neglected to talk about his possession of Blaise with Blaise right there. He didn’t see a need to describe his resounding failure with Snape, either, though by the glitter in Harry’s eyes, he knew there was something missing. But he didn’t pursue it, and Draco didn’t pursue the mishap with the phoenix fire, since Harry had admitted he was wrong. They slid back more easily into companionship than Draco would have expected.

Maybe something really has changed, now that he’s accepted my courting ritual, Draco thought, and admired the shine of Harry’s eyes when he smiled, and counted the days in his head until Walpurgis. Harry expected the post owl that came winging in to him at breakfast. He and Scrimgeour had exchanged numerous letters on the matter of werewolves in the past few months, since Harry had made the oath to fight for werewolves’ rights, and the Minister was a few days overdue with the next one.

He didn’t expect what it said, though.

April 5th, 1996

Dear Harry:

You will know that the full moon was the past three nights. It seems that a rogue werewolf calling himself Evergreen bit a member of the Wizengamot on the second one. The Wizengamot is meeting today to set stricter limits on the rights of werewolves. I am sorry, but there is nothing I can do to stop this when the Wizengamot has a personal cause for outrage. And it is feared that Evergreen may be acting out of a larger political agenda. There were a few points in the past when werewolves tried to make people in power amenable to their viewpoints by biting them. It has worked because the victims decided to hide the curse, and allowed their biters to blackmail them.

Elder Gillyflower has decided to reveal the curse she is now infected with. That means that the Wizengamot is buzzing with outrage on her behalf, and fear that this might happen to them next, and determination not to allow any werewolf to achieve his ends based on intimidation. It is likely that the stricter limits will include mandatory confinement on the nights of the full moon for all werewolves, and from there it is only a small step to putting them in Tullianum permanently, with penalties for those who refuse to admit their curse. Amelia is already speaking of authorizing Aurors to kill free-running werewolves on those nights. She is shaken and upset by what happened to Elder Gillyflower, an old friend of hers, but other members of the Wizengamot will not be less extreme in their sentiments.

I am sorry, Harry. But there is no way to oppose this right now. Werewolves are not allowed to speak to the Wizengamot in their own defense, either during trials or in situations like this, when laws debating them are being passed—one of Fudge's provisions that I never dreamed would cause so much trouble.

Regretfully,

Rufus Scrimgeour,

Minister of Magic.

Harry was shaking by the time he finished the letter, and he crumpled it viciously in one hand as he stood. Scrimgeour hadn't mentioned what time the Wizengamot was meeting—probably in an attempt to discourage Harry from interfering—and he might already be too late. But if not, then Harry knew whom he wanted to call upon.

Draco grabbed his arm. "Harry! Where are you going?"

Harry tossed the letter to him and sprinted out of the Great Hall. He knew Snape would be following. He didn't care. At the moment, nothing was more important than having a modicum of privacy so he could use the communication spell that Charles Rosier-Henlin had taught him.

He spoke Laura Gloryflower's name, and heard the soft chime of phoenix song. A moment later, Laura's voice sounded in his ears, and Harry said, "A werewolf bit a member of the Wizengamot two nights ago. They're meeting today to try and push stricter limits on them, which will probably mean confinement in Tullianum on full moon nights—or permanently. Can you help me?"

"Of course," said Laura at once. "Delilah will not object to others knowing she is a werewolf if it is for a cause like this one. I think the hiding is rather wearing on her, to tell you the truth. She is a trained war witch, and was made to walk in the sunlight and reveal her secrets to all, even as the bells in her hair proclaim her skill. I will be at the Ministry in an hour, Harry."

Harry nodded, then remembered she couldn't see him, and said, "Thank you, Mrs. Gloryflower. I know this is sudden, but I don't see much chance to stop them if we don't move now."

"I am prepared," said Laura, and her voice deepened into a growl. "And I do have favors in the Ministry I may call in, Harry. Ordinarily, I save them for the idle telling of gossip, but this is more important. They are not going to hurt my niece." She was snarling like a lioness by the time she cut off the communication spell.

Harry turned around, and saw Snape next to him. "When are you going to the Ministry?" Snape asked quietly.

"As soon as you're ready," said Harry. "And Remus. I want you both to be there, even though I'll have to go into the courtroom without you, sir."

Snape cocked his head. "And why is that?"

"They have to see me as an adult, flanked by people committed to the cause of werewolf freedom, and you're my guardian, sir," Harry pointed out. "As long as you're there, it'll be easier for them to think of me as a child. I don't want to leave you behind, but I can't have you overshadowing me."

Snape inclined his head, various emotions beating just under the calm surface of his face. Harry was fairly sure that one of them was pride, and even surer with the next comment he made. "I can hardly complain about the development of your political instincts," Snape observed.

Rufus would not say that he was afraid. Never that. A sitting Minister could afford to be cautious, worried, eager, preoccupied, but not afraid. Otherwise he would become like Fudge, terrified of his own shadow, sure that something lurked in every corner to finish him off. So Rufus would not say that he was afraid, but he could say that he was not looking forward to entering the small holding cell in front of him. This bothered him in a way that even entering Lily Potter's cell to see how much she had suffered from Captio Horrificus did not.

He looked at Percy Weasley, finally, and nodded. "A lesson for you," he said. Percy's eyes burned with apprehension as Rufus stepped forward and rapped firmly on the door of the cell, deliberately knocking high. Aurors tended to put their wards all over the lower three-quarters, and clustered especially thickly around the lock.

The door opened at once to the signal, and Rufus caught a glimpse of the pale functionary from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. "He's bad, sir," he said briefly, before he turned back to deal with their furiously struggling prisoner.

Rufus stepped into the room. It was claustrophobically small. That was meant to intimidate those who waited here to see the Wizengamot.

It only served to make their captive this time madder.

He whirled and snarled and snapped in his chains, for all the world like a wolf caught in a trap—which was what he was, Rufus reminded himself. His enormous strength meant it took three Regulation flunkies, all big, burly men, to keep him from breaking free. His amber eyes burned, and he took great and obvious delight in champing his teeth near the faces of his captors, to make them flinch and duck. They didn't think he could pass along the infection in human form, but it was the day after the full moon, and they were mindful that two of their own had nearly died in trying to capture this one werewolf.

That was the news that Rufus hadn't put in the letter to Harry. The Department was horribly embarrassed about it; both men would heal, and neither had been infected. Elder Gillyflower had been, and she was the reason the Wizengamot was meeting today to decide Evergreen's fate.

It bothered Rufus that he wouldn't give any name other than Evergreen. His age bothered him, too. When he could look away from the lupine eyes and the teeth, which appeared longer and sharper than any ordinary human teeth even though they probably weren't, he was very aware that this werewolf was a sixteen-year-old boy. Foul-mouthed, of course, and wearing, before they gave him a prisoner's robes, ragged clothes that indicated he had nothing much in the world, but, still. Sixteen years old.

And, just to make things even more complicated than they already were, he was a Muggle, infected by some rogue werewolf five years ago, and living with one of the London packs since then. That much he had admitted. Rufus knew it would start at least part of the Wizengamot, Fudge's leftover cronies, baying about the need to Obliviate Evergreen when they were done trying him—never mind that he already knew magic existed. Then they would get onto cracking down on Muggle "incursions" into the wizarding world, by

which they meant Muggleborns' families knowing about magic, and they would drag Rufus into a political battle he was not ready to fight.

Evergreen could help him, if he appeared more sane and reasonable. But he wanted to drag people around the room by his chains instead, and stare at everyone with burning hatred.

And Rufus could feel his own fear, long-conditioned, squirming in him. He didn't want to be in the same room with a lycanthrope. He stiffened his shoulders and snapped, "Evergreen."

The boy stopped struggling with a suddenness no human could have imitated. He turned his head towards Rufus and stared. Sure enough, burning hatred shone in his amber eyes.

"You won't be able to speak when we're in the courtroom," Rufus said. "Someone will cast a Silencio on you—that's a silencing spell—"

"I know what it is," said Evergreen, every few words chopped off. Rufus wasn't sure if it was a speech impediment, or if it just came from his heavy panting, itself born of his constant struggles. "I've lived with wizards for the past five years."

"You know," said Rufus, seeing a chance that hadn't been visible before, because of the boy's self-absorption, "you could get out of your punishment, or get it lessened, if you gave us a little information."

"What kind of information?" Evergreen let his tongue loll out of the corner of his mouth. Rufus wished he wouldn't.

"Where your pack is located," said Rufus. "How many werewolves it consists of. Who they are." That last was especially important, because werewolves weren't supposed to have wands. In the wizarding world itself, as in the case of Remus Lupin, it could be ignored as long as the werewolves didn't use Unforgivables or Dark Arts. But using magic in front of Muggles...Rufus could feel his skin crawling more than it had when he realized the problems Evergreen represented. The last thing they needed was Muggles learning of

their world when there was a war on. “Whether the attack on Elder Gillyflower was part of a larger plan or not.”

Evergreen barked at him. Rufus realized only a moment later that it was meant to be a laugh. “I’m not telling you anything,” said Evergreen. “Pack loyalty forbids it, even if you had treated me nicely.” He gave a sharp, sly jerk sideways, and nearly rolled two of the men holding his chains off their feet. Evergreen lowered his head and studied them with his dark fringe falling into his eyes, as if waiting for a moment of weakness.

Rufus ground his teeth and wished they could simply use Stupefy—easier all around, and less messy—but werewolves were highly resistant to magic the day after a full moon, even Muggle werewolves. The Stupefy spells might hold, or they might wear off in the middle of the debate. The chains at least let them confine the werewolf, and without magic of his own, he wouldn’t be able to get out of them easily.

“Listen, Evergreen,” he said softly, trying to make his voice persuasive, trying to remind himself of what Harry had told him last year, that werewolves and the other magical creatures were also people whom he represented, “you must know that most of my colleagues would like nothing so much as to condemn you to Tullianum. But if we know more of the particulars of your situation, then we don’t need to do that. I don’t know what you mean by pack loyalty, but—”

“Of course you don’t.” Evergreen’s face had taken on the implacably bored look that adolescents did so well. “That’s because you’re outsiders.” He said it with the same kind of condescension that Rufus had heard from the lips of numerous people when talking about Muggles and Muggleborns. “Loki wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

Rufus narrowed his eyes. He’d heard of Loki before. Maybe he was a real person, and maybe he wasn’t; so many werewolves in London claimed to be in contact with him that Rufus was inclined to believe the latter. But if Evergreen had seen him, or knew who the person hiding behind the name was, then he could be an even more valuable source of information than Rufus had thought.

"Listen," he said. "We're offering you the same chance we would offer most prisoners, the same chance we offered Death Eaters during the First War. If you give us information, we'll protect you."

Evergreen sneered at him. "And I told you, we're not interested."

Rufus knew what it meant when a werewolf started using the plural. He wouldn't say anything else. With a brief, frustrated gesture he couldn't entirely suppress, he turned out of the room, limping past Percy.

"Did you think he'd turn them over, sir?" Percy asked his back as they walked up the corridor towards the Wizengamot's courtroom.

"I hoped so." Rufus rubbed his forehead with one hand. It seemed that something he'd feared like a bad dream a dozen years ago had become all too real. Muggle and wizard werewolves had formed mixed communities on the edge of the magical world, and there would inevitably be crossover, leaking, bleeding in. Evergreen might still have Muggle friends. And he was so young that he would want to brag, to show off or hint at secrets, knowledge he had access to that they didn't. He might even introduce some of them to wizards, for all that Rufus knew.

And from there, it was only a matter of time until Muggles who would react badly to magic heard of it, or until wizarding authorities did, and pushed Rufus into actions he didn't want to take but wouldn't be able to justify not taking.

Or, worst of all, it might give support to the Death Eaters' beliefs, and push other people into joining them, if they thought that Muggles were invading their world.

Rufus shook his head. I shouldn't have told Harry about this incident. If Evergreen was a wizard, or if he didn't come from one of the mixed packs, or if he hadn't bitten an Elder...and the timing of this couldn't have been worse, either.

He did pause, then. Yes, all of those factors were working together at once to make this situation as complicated as possible. And that whispered to his Slytherin brain that this was deliberate, planned.

But how could that be? If pack loyalty was everything that Evergreen was hinting that it was, then his pack should have hidden him. Instead, the hunters had reported that there hadn't been any other werewolves anywhere near Evergreen, and he had run wild through the streets of London, as if he didn't care about seeking a safe haunt.

Either it was an incredibly clumsy plan, which the smooth execution would argue against, or the werewolves wanted something that Rufus couldn't fathom.

Or it isn't a plan at all, and you're seeing shadows of plans where there's only desperation, he reminded himself, and then he was at the door of the Wizengamot courtroom and the Aurors were letting him through.

His mood darkened when he realized that Harry was standing in the middle of the sunken courtroom floor, with Laura Gloryflower and Remus Lupin beside him, as well as a young witch who looked Gloryflower, but whom Rufus didn't know personally. The young woman gazed up at him as he walked to his place in the balcony seats, and he caught a glimpse of amber eyes.

Fuck. He's going to bloody force the issue, isn't he? And on the worst case possible.

Rufus sat down solidly as the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures guards brought in Evergreen. Whatever happened next, there was no one right choice to make, and his course wasn't clear for the first time since he'd become Minister.

Harry had discussed what they should do with Laura before they'd even entered the Wizengamot courtroom. A helpful Gloryflower contact had revealed the time of the meeting, and when they'd shown up, the Aurors on the courtroom doors had argued with them for a few inconclusive moments before giving up, because, Harry thought, of his magic and Gloryflower's political power combined. They would let them in and let the Wizengamot deal with them.

Remus and Delilah couldn't speak aloud here, as werewolves weren't allowed to defend themselves before the Wizengamot. That left the words up to Laura and Harry. Harry had decided that he would add his support only if and when it became necessary. Let Laura lead this particular charge. If nothing else, her support would have the advantage of surprise, since so few people knew that her niece was a werewolf.

Thus he stood silent as Elder Sapiention leaned forward and said, "Well, with the Minister, we are all gathered. And, Mr. Pott—that is, Harry, I'm sure we're all interested in learning why you're here."

"You should be questioning my presence, not his," said Laura in a voice that seemed to pick up extra echoes from the room around them, as if other angry people were there and shouting in chorus. "After all, he is vates, and sworn to the protection and freedom of magical creatures. But I am Laura Gloryflower, head of a northern Light family. Why am I here?"

"Yes, very well," said Sapiention, sounding a bit put out. "Why are you here, Mrs. Gloryflower?"

"Because my niece, Delilah Gloryflower, is a werewolf," said Laura, nodding to the young woman standing silent behind her. It hadn't surprised Harry to see the way she and Remus had leaned towards each other; Remus had told him, without really explaining what it meant, that he, Hawthorn, and the remaining Light werewolves were becoming a pack. They had the common bond of all being victims of Fenrir Greyback, if nothing else. "And unlike the majority of the wizarding world, I will not cast her out and turn my back on her because of something that was not her fault. I will guard her, and part of that guarding is making sure that persecution does not fall on her. I had considered the anti-werewolf laws up to this point as livable. I am not sure anymore. After all, I am not the one who must labor under them. And this new policy of possibly confining all werewolves, even the most law-abiding, in Tullianum on nights of the full moon is not acceptable."

"It's very sad, of course, that your niece was a victim," said Sapientian, stiffly. Harry knew it wasn't his imagination that he was looking at Delilah with distaste now, and flinching when she turned her head, as if he expected her to turn into a beast and lunge up the wall at him. "But there's nothing that we can do about it, Mrs. Gloryflower. Our people, the common people of the wizarding world, must be protected."

"Do you realize what you are saying?" Laura asked, her voice rising in passion. "Do you realize that anyone, any of your 'common people,' could become a victim? It happened to Elder Gillyflower. The problem will not be solved by turning your back on the victims unfortunate enough to contract the disease. And that is what it is, Elder: a disease, a curse. Not a crime, and not a sin."

"But where and when it spreads, we must protect others against it." That was Amelia Bones, leaning forward now, her hands clenched around the edges of the balcony railing. Harry could see her face tighten in rage and pain. He remembered, for a moment, what Scrimgeour had said in his letter about Elder Gillyflower being her personal friend, and felt a surge of sympathy. Then he remembered that Gillyflower was undoubtedly rich enough to afford the Wolfsbane Potion, and that Bones would condemn others who couldn't to existences even more wretched than they already were, and his sympathy withered. "It was spread on purpose by this monster you see before you. It can be no coincidence that he bit an Elder of the Wizengamot, though so far he refuses to respond to questioning."

Harry turned to look at the werewolf they'd brought in in chains. He was very young, perhaps only a year older than Harry himself, and the way he stood, the way he vibrated, told Harry he was either a Squib or a Muggle. His eyes were bright, and his tongue lolled from his mouth in a gesture Harry had learned to recognize as laughter in Hawthorn and Remus. He met Harry's gaze, and he winked. Then he bowed, making his chains rattle and his handlers jerk nervously on them.

Another Elder spoke then, voice harsh with suspicion. "You would not know the reasons behind this attack, vates?" She sneered the last word.

"No," said Harry, though he went on staring at the young werewolf. "I don't know this man." But he seems to know me, or of me.

"Please be honest, Harry." That was Scrimgeour, and he was tense, weary, looking for some way out of this. "Do you really not know him?"

"I've never heard the name Evergreen," said Harry, concentrating and trying to remember if he could have seen this boy in any other context. But he had to shake his head, in the end. He would have remembered someone with such a low level of magic. In the alliance gathering and at Gollrish Y Thie, Calibrid had stood out to him incredibly. "I don't know him."

Evergreen spoke then; they probably hadn't thought he would dare, and so hadn't Silenced him. "But I know you, vates, as you can probably surmise. Greetings from Loki."

He was hit with several spells then, at least one of which managed to bind his mouth shut. And still he laughed, his eyes sparkling at Harry even if he couldn't speak.

Harry took a deep breath and faced the Wizengamot again, motioning with his head to Laura. Increasing suspicion of Evergreen and himself wouldn't help their cause. He wanted Laura to plead it.

She took up the signal and responded magnificently. "You don't understand what I will give to help keep my niece out of prison," she said, her voice clear and unwavering. "And to insure that she can hold a paying job, for that matter, and retain custody of any children she might have in future, and own her own property. I will not let you confine her in Tullianum when she has committed no crime."

"It's not certain that we're going to decide that, Mrs. Gloryflower," said Scrimgeour, obviously trying to smooth things over.

"Isn't it?" Laura asked with a scornful toss of her head, echoing Harry's thoughts precisely. "My apologies, then, Minister. The faces of your colleagues certainly look as if they're set and decided."

“As we should be,” said Amelia Bones. “We must do something about those who would hurt our children, our friends, the helpless and the old. You should know that, ma’am,” she dared to tell Laura. “You are a mother, and dedicated to it. Would you like a werewolf to bite one of your children?”

Laura’s mouth parted, and Harry could see fangs growing. She restrained herself from transforming with an obvious effort. “One has,” she said. “And I have lived with it, and in fact defended her fiercely to those who would question her soul. Delilah is a stronger person for this. She did not become a monster, and she did not, in any sense of the word, deserve it.”

Amelia looked back at her, just as angry, just as stubborn. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Gloryflower,” she said. “But I’ve lost a friend now, and the rest of her life was changed because of what was either a werewolf’s monstrous killing instincts or a sick, disgusting political ploy.” She turned and faced Scrimgeour. “Please call for a vote, Minister. Mrs. Gloryflower and Mr. Pott—the vates have no right to be here. We’ve let them have their illegal say for long enough.”

“We can witness the vote, can’t we?” Laura asked, her voice so proper that Harry knew she was angry just from that. “That is a matter of public record, or would be if anyone knew this meeting was being held.”

Scrimgeour interrupted before any of the Elders could speak. “It is permitted, yes. After that, Mrs. Gloryflower, Harry, I will have to ask you to leave.”

Harry folded his arms, and wished he could force words past the furious lump in his throat. But they hadn’t convinced them, even though Laura’s face said she would keep fighting, and he could not use his magic to compel the Wizengamot to obedience, and he would not use it to make them fear him. He had to stand there and listen as three-quarters of the Wizengamot voted to confine all registered werewolves to Tullianum on full moon nights, unless they could make arrangements for confinement themselves. No one said what would happen to unregistered werewolves or those found running free on

those nights, but Harry could guess. The only possible consolation was that Scrimgeour abstained from voting.

Remus said nothing. Delilah said nothing. Evergreen shifted once, and when Harry heard the clink and rattle of his chains, he turned his head to find the young man's eyes on his, clear and penetrating.

Why is he happy about this? What does he want? Harry continued to hold his gaze as the Wizengamot voted to hold Evergreen until he either agreed to take Veritaserum or confessed to what he'd been planning on his own. Amelia Bones's justification for the decision was that they didn't want to misuse Veritaserum and "overstep the bounds of our authority." Harry bit his lip to keep from laughing, aloud and savagely, at that statement.

Aurors entered the courtroom to escort them to the door when the proceedings were done with. Evergreen gave Harry another bow, and watched him out of sight, shaking the chains once or twice just to fuck with his handlers' minds, Harry was sure.

What does he want? How can I sympathize with a werewolf who did bite someone else on purpose, like Greyback? But how can I do anything else, when I see the way he's treated, as if he were worse than a Death Eater? Even Bellatrix got more of a trial than that!

Harry caught his breath and forced his thoughts away from questions he couldn't answer without more information, onto more productive, if grimmer, ones. Well, that failed, but that just means that I'll have to do something else, something more unmistakable, to show everyone how much I mean this oath. And I am going to win in the end. I'm more determined than they are. They're driven by fear, and I'm driven by conviction.

Remus walked behind Harry, smelling his confusion and frustration, and half-wished he could tell Harry what the plan was, what Loki was doing. But, of course, he couldn't, because Loki had specifically asked him not to, and loyalty between packs—and to the man who had helped Remus more than once when he was younger—forbade him to spill the secrets to anyone who wasn't a werewolf anyway.

Besides, Harry would hate the truth. Loki's werewolves were upsetting the applecart on purpose. They'd chosen the most difficult candidate to send to trial, the one most likely to stir debate. Evergreen would be doing other things than sitting quietly in Tullianum, and in such a way as to make it impossible either to dismiss werewolves as innocent victims or shove them aside and treat them like depraved criminals. They were equal to wizards, and they deserved to be treated so.

And Harry was part of the plan. By pushing forward, Loki would force the vates to stop sitting on the fence. Come down and join them—and he would, Remus knew, because of the oath he'd sworn and because of where his sympathies lay—and then werewolves would gain their rights more quickly than they would if they waited for Harry to make up his own mind. He might not ever do it. He was still a wizard, and couldn't understand the discrimination werewolves faced. He might be content with slow progress from the wizarding side, as long as it was progress.

To Remus, the discrimination was perfectly understandable, and it rasped against him like a polecat's scent in his nostrils. And he understood the frustration that would drive Loki to send Evergreen after Elder Gillyflower, too, and the loyalty that would let Evergreen go happily to Tullianum and not rely on his pack to rescue him. Werewolves like Fenrir Greyback, serving a cause that would ultimately not benefit his kind, were contemptible. Loki was putting the cause of the packs first, and that was why so many were faithful to him.

So Remus put up his head and paced down the hall behind Harry, sorry for some of the consequences of the plan, but exulting in the idea that someday he might be able to look other wizards in the eye, and speak his piece, and know that they would have to listen to him.

Chapter Seventy-Seven: For Such Is the World

Snape ate his breakfast slowly. It was the first morning of Easter holidays, and most of the students had abandoned the school yesterday. Even the Potter brat—Snape continued to call him that despite his improvements in dueling, because the boy had neither changed his last name nor his impudent behavior in Potions—had gone with the Weasleys, to the same heavily warded location he'd shared with them during the summer. Harry had stayed, and Draco had stayed because Harry had stayed, and of course several of the professors were still there.

Yes. They are.

Snape laid down his fork and leaned forward to stare at Lupin, who was likewise eating slowly, and reading the Daily Prophet with a faint smile on his face. The front-page story, Snape knew, concerned the werewolf who had bitten the Wizengamot Elder. Apparently, he'd started talking last night, but it was nothing anyone wanted to hear. He was lecturing his captors about life in the werewolf packs, and asking, "with a mischievous glint in his eye," as the paper put it, whether most wizarding parents knew just where their adolescent children spent the evenings.

And Lupin was reading it, and smiling.

Snape wondered that the rest of them couldn't see it. But then, McGonagall had her mind on the school wards, and Flitwick had a relationship with Lupin that consisted mostly of Flitwick talking and Lupin nodding. And the other Professors were obsessed with their own concerns, except Hooch, who tended to stare at and then glance away from Lupin quickly when she didn't think anyone was watching. So Snape supposed that the others didn't notice how strange it was for the werewolf to be happy that another one of the monsters had been arrested.

"Something amusing, Lupin?"

Lupin looked up with that mild shine in his eyes that Snape hated. It said that he accepted all that life threw at him and understood that it

wasn't other wizards' fault for being prejudiced, but the world's fault for being made that way. Snape had loathed it more since Lupin became Head of Gryffindor House, because now it was a mask, and not reality. Lupin had accepted far more of his own temper and his own strength since he'd been at the Seers' Sanctuary. He used the mask to make people think he was gentle. He wasn't.

Not anymore. And Snape wondered if that was part of the reason for the smile on his lips, which now he'd tucked neatly away.

"Not at all," said Lupin seriously. "They're thinking about confining us in Tullianum on the nights of the full moon, Snape, at least according to this article." He tapped the words on the front page. "And you know that they decided to do that yesterday, at a meeting we were actually able to see." His lips curved into a disturbing smile. "How would you feel, if they decided that everyone with the Dark Mark had to spend three nights in Tullianum a month, purely to insure good behavior?"

Snape didn't respond for a long moment, sipping his tea. Then he said, "I do not consider myself and others with the Dark Mark part of a set, Lupin. I was under the impression that you do consider yourself allies with other werewolves."

There. There was the beast, in the flash of Lupin's amber eyes as they turned on him. Snape sat and stared at him. He felt the old fear well up; he had nearly died on the claws of that beast when he was sixteen. He could have become infected. Neither Dumbledore nor McGonagall, of course, would ever believe him when he talked about werewolves being dangerous, thinking it was only prejudice that guided him. It wasn't prejudice, it was bloody good sense.

And if it hadn't been Dumbledore's precious Black involved in that prank, they probably would have been expelled. And Lupin certainly wouldn't have been allowed to attend Hogwarts.

"I do," Lupin was saying, apparently recovering from his surprise. "You heard that at Harry's alliance meeting, Severus." He picked at his food for a moment. Snape narrowed his eyes, and watched the way he snapped his jaws. That could have come from the fact that the full moon was only two nights past, of course, but Lupin didn't

ordinarily eat that way even now. It seemed to come from his allying himself more firmly with werewolves. Snape gave a faint nod, feeling the realization sink home in him and link with other observations he'd made about Lupin in the past few days, and then the werewolf met his eyes and held them.

"I don't think it's right, what they're doing," Lupin breathed, gaze intent. "But there's one good thing that might come out of it. If the Ministry goes fast and far enough, there's going to be a reaction. People will only take so much, Severus. We've already lost the right to work to keep ourselves alive, to have our own families and homes, to have wands, though they often ignore that last one. They'll tighten the restrictions now. They've taken our freedom. What else is left? Not much. Life. If the Ministry declares a return to the Werewolf Hunts they used to have in the eighteenth century, then yes, I think that's cause for amusement. They have no idea what the bloody fuck they're doing, what force they're about to unleash."

Snape felt a moment of startled discomfort. He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard Lupin curse. But he watched Lupin's eyes go back to the paper, and saw that faint smile appear again, and his mind turned in a new direction, away from one werewolf's peculiarities and towards what those peculiarities might mean.

He felt himself freeze, not losing movement, but losing superfluous thoughts. His mind pivoted for a long moment, turning, gathering, spinning information. Snape waited. He had felt this before, usually in the moments when he crouched at the Dark Lord's feet as a spy and considered what he had to say to survive. The cold in his mind stripped away all the irrelevancies and told him what would keep him alive—or, in this case, not him but someone dear to him.

"You are forcing Harry towards this," he said lowly. "He is trying to stop something that violent from happening, and you are pressuring him deliberately towards it."

Lupin jerked his head up like a wolf scenting the hounds, but he spoke calmly enough. "I am? Don't be silly, Severus. Of course I'm not. I assure you, I don't know the werewolf who did this, and I do wish the Ministry would simply back off and talk with us like

reasonable people. But that's not going to happen. You didn't feel the atmosphere in that courtroom yesterday. I did. If we simply lie back and do nothing, the Ministry will start killing us, and the fear in other wizards' hearts will prompt them to accept it. Our situation is the most desperate of all the magical creatures' right now."

"And it did not occur to you to tell Harry about that?" Snape asked, his voice soft. Lupin could think it was disbelief making it soft if he wished; that was his prerogative. "It did not occur to you that he would fight, heart and soul, for you without your having to begin a bloody revolution?"

"He has no objections to revolution," said Lupin, his voice gone colder. "We heard that at the alliance meeting."

"Not this kind of revolution." Snape felt his wandless magic peer out from behind his eyes with the force of his anger, and strove to push it back down. This was—too dangerous for him to use it. "He must respect the free wills of wizards as well as of magical creatures, Lupin. Have you forgotten that?"

"And we have a need for him that none of the others did." Lupin's voice had lowered again, and was passionate enough to sound like a growl. "You forget, Severus. The others are bound, but they are spared further harm. Their webs extend so far and no farther, because most of the wizards don't even know about the webs. We are the ones being pushed against, and we are the ones who stand to lose our rights one by one. And who knows if he will ever break our webs and free us? That would involve acting against the free will of the wolf. Harry may have sworn to our cause from his vates principles, but the need we have of him extends beyond that, to the powerful wizard and the Black heir. And that is power that Harry has been reluctant to use in the past."

Snape stared at him in silence for a long moment. Then he said, "You are acting like humans in this."

Lupin gave a sharp nod. "Humans armed with the only weapon we have. I don't like it, I don't like us having to do this—"

“What is ‘this?’” It had occurred to Snape that he knew none of the details of the plan, even if he knew the motivation.

Lupin shook his head. “Pack loyalty forbids me telling you, Severus.”

Snape leaned back in his chair and narrowed his eyes. “And so I am proved right once again,” he said, deliberately making his voice as sarcastic as possible. He had to make Lupin intrigued enough to keep looking at him, so that his Legilimency probe would go home and strike at the mind behind those eyes.

“What do you mean?” Lupin leaned a little nearer.

Snape spoke smoothly, even as he sent his mind knifing forward. He could insult James Potter and his friends in his sleep. “That the Marauders are a pack of worthless cowards, braggarts, and bullies, Lupin, who would betray anyone for the sake of getting what they want. I had been willing to reconsider you in light of what you have done, and tried to do, for Harry. I see now that the only one of you worth anything is the rat.”

It worked. He was back in his own mind, holding the information he desired, and Lupin was rising from the table, looking completely unaware that something was wrong, his teeth bared in a vicious snarl. McGonagall turned and looked at them sternly. Lupin ignored her, and Snape did not dare take his eyes off him. His hand was on his wand under the table, his magic trembling at the edge of his control.

“You cannot understand,” Lupin whispered. “You will never understand, Snape. I tried to deny and excuse what I was for far too long. In the Sanctuary, I learned to acknowledge it. And I learned that no one is going to do anything for us unless we do it for ourselves. I love Harry, but he will hesitate on this too long. He’ll give more weight to the free will of wizards than of werewolves. And while he’s trying to find some way to satisfy both sides, they’ll start killing us. Even if we hadn’t done anything to force the issue, it would have come to this sooner or later. I love Harry, but I don’t live for him, the way that you apparently do.”

He turned and walked rapidly towards the doors of the Great Hall. Snape sipped his tea and watched him go, ignoring Harry's anxious glance from the Slytherin table. Harry would come to see him in a short time, no doubt, and hear all about it.

The Headmistress was a bit more insistent.

"Severus? Did you start an argument with Remus, again?"

Snape glanced at McGonagall with a faint smirk. "Always blaming the Slytherin, Minerva?"

McGonagall visibly reined herself in. She did approximate a neutral tone a few moments later. "I was merely observing the fact that you have a temper, Severus, and Remus does not."

Oh, doesn't he? Severus smiled at her, and saw her frown. "I suggest you talk to Remus about it," he said, standing. "I would be interested to see what he says." He caught Harry's eye briefly, then turned towards his own quarters. He had marking that he could do until Harry arrived.

Before he could get out of the Great Hall, the post owls came in carrying the package for Harry.

Harry noticed the post owls immediately; it was hard not to, when five of them were clutched about and laboring with an enormous package. The package came to the Slytherin table, the way he had been secretly suspecting it would since he saw it. The day a mysterious delivery entered the Great Hall and was not for him would probably be the day the war was over.

The post owls looked like ordinary birds, he noted as they set down their burden gently in front of him, not from Gringotts or any pureblood wizarding family. However, when Harry tried to fetch food from the table to feed them, they spread their wings and wheeled away at once, heading for the windows. Harry blinked and looked at the package, wrapped in red and black paper, wondering if they were upset or merely tired.

Then Argutus, coiled on his shoulder, lifted his head and flicked his tongue. "There is something organic in there," he said.

Harry warily cast one of the spells he'd seen Narcissa using on the Room of Requirement, and nodded. Yes, there was flesh and blood in the package, but he couldn't tell what it was. The spell wasn't sophisticated enough to sense the difference between, say, a venomous snake and a non-venomous one.

"Let me, Harry."

Harry moved out of the way so that Draco could cast some dispelling magic on the package. No traps were revealed. Nothing moved, either, even when Draco incanted a curse Harry didn't know, and explained that it was meant to sting a hiding person or creature intolerably. Draco tried most of the countercurses he knew, and they struck the package harmlessly.

Harry leaned closer, and let Argutus have another sniff of the package, as well as sniffing himself. No smell came to either of them except a faint, dry, dusty one. He shook his head. If there was an animal in there, Argutus should be able to tell me what kind it was. Flesh and blood, so it can't be a plant. What the hell is it?

He badly wanted to open the package and find out, but he wasn't about to without some more preparation. He Levitated it, and nodded to Snape, who had halted behind his chair. "Do you have potions that can melt the box without touching the contents, sir?"

"I may have, depending on what the contents are," said Snape, and led them out of the Great Hall. Harry could feel eyes on him from the few remaining students, mostly members of the dueling club. He met a few of them and shook his head. He didn't have any more idea what was in the package than what the cause of the argument between Snape and Remus had been.

They entered Snape's office, and Snape busied himself taking out a Dissolving Potion. He cast several spells of his own spells on the box first, but wasn't able to tell what was inside. He then instructed them to move out of the way as he poured the potion on the box. Harry had

to hold an increasingly curious Argutus back, or the Omen snake would have slithered down his arm and towards the box, determined to be the first one to get a look inside.

The box began to smoke as the potion struck it, and then it billowed up into purple fumes, flowing back to the vial when Snape motioned for it to do so. That left the object inside the package untouched. Harry swallowed when he saw what it was. It was no wonder they'd not been able to smell anything more than dust; the preservation spells used on it were the same ones used on library books.

Someone had cut off Firenze's head and sent it to him. It sat, horribly real, in the middle of the floor, with gobs of black, dried blood still clinging to the neck. Firenze's eyes were open. Harry couldn't tell what expression he'd died with. It might have been shock, or only mild surprise.

"That's not—" Draco said, and stopped. Harry shot a sideways glance at him and found him looking pale. Well, while he might have heard stories about this, he wouldn't ever have seen something like it. Harry slid an arm around Draco's shoulders to give him support, and felt the other boy lean against him. "That's not real, is it?" Draco whispered. "Someone didn't really cut off a centaur's head and send it to you?"

"Centaur?" asked Snape sharply. He'd been staring at Firenze; now he looked around at them.

Harry nodded. "Firenze was one of the centaurs I freed from their web in the Forbidden Forest. He was—he was going to go negotiate with the giants for me." He swallowed. "I didn't know that giants would work preservation spells and send the head back when a negotiation failed," he said quietly.

"They would not." Snape pointed his wand at the head. "Acclaro nuntium!"

The head wavered like smoke for a moment, and Harry prepared to protect his nose, since he thought the preservation spells would dissipate and they would be assaulted by the smell of rotting flesh. Instead, Firenze's features simply rearranged themselves, and now

Harry could see the message on the face in impossibly tiny and clear letters that must have been cut by magic.

Snape leaned near enough to read them, his wand still out. “Potter,” he said, his voice empty of emotion. “Your centaur was too late. I thought it would be amusing to send you this, as a little memento mori. Regards, Igor Karkaroff.”

Harry caught his breath, and swallowed. Emotions collided in him like charging horses, so thick that he could barely decide what to feel first. Sorrow that Firenze had died? Rage at Karkaroff for desecrating his body like this? Fear that the giants were now fighting on Voldemort’s side? Disgust that the Death Eater had chosen to send such a vile message?

“Karkaroff sent many messages like that during the war, but usually to victims’ families,” said Snape, his face expressionless. “My pardons, Harry. I would have warned you beforehand about what to expect, but it has been years since I have seen a package like that one.”

“It’s—all right.” Harry squeezed Draco’s shoulder one more time, and stepped away from Snape, forcing his mind to function. “Voldemort has the giants now. We’ll need to be more careful, plan more carefully, than ever.” He studied Firenze’s head for a moment. “Will the preservation spells suddenly leave off?”

“They should not.” Snape’s mouth twisted. “Igor always took good care of his—presents.”

Harry nodded, and then gently lifted Firenze’s head from its place. “I have to tell the centaurs,” he explained, more to Draco’s horrified gaze than to Snape’s. “They deserve to know that one of their own died trying to help me.” Now he could feel sorrow; tears stung his eyes as he stared down at Firenze’s head and remembered how the centaur had been alive on New Year’s Eve. The skin felt as warm under his fingers as if that were still the case. Karkaroff couldn’t have cast his preservation spells more than a few minutes after he’d killed Firenze. “And they deserve to know who did it.”

“Harry.”

He looked up at Snape, who was standing with no expression at all on his face. That was all right. Harry knew that didn't always mean he felt nothing; sometimes he was simply trying to control his own struggling emotions. “Yes?” he asked.

“You should know,” said Snape softly, “that Lupin is part of a plan with other werewolf packs. The arrest of the young werewolf who bit the Wizengamot Elder was calculated. He'll be staying in prison, but acquiring various objects and spreading various bits of information to show wizards that werewolves are different and more dangerous than we think they are. And more bites are planned, as well as the opening of the wizarding world to the Muggle one through the border communities. A leader named Loki, who lives in London, has arranged this. They're trying to speed along something they believe would have happened anyway—the Wizengamot turning to the open hunting and killing of werewolves—to force you to help them.”

Harry felt his insides freeze in a way that hadn't happened even when he saw Firenze's head. “Remus is part of this, you said?” he whispered. “How do you know?”

“I used Legilimency on him this morning at the breakfast table,” said Snape. “I know only as much as he does, which isn't much. He didn't want to know everything. Apparently he thinks his betrayal of you is lessened that way.” Snape sneered, but it seemed almost reflexive; his dark eyes were watching Harry intently. “Lupin all but admitted the motivation to me at breakfast, this morning. The werewolves want to live in wizarding society, Harry, since they don't trust you to break their webs. They think you will not act against or kill the wolves inside them, when those wolves don't want to die. They're planning to use you as a driving force to secure themselves rights as soon as possible. They think no one else will fight for them.”

Harry felt light-headed. He leaned on the wall for a moment, and found himself running his fingers across the letters carved on Firenze's face; the weight of the head rested in the crook of his arm. Then the weight was gone, and he was turned to the side and resting his face in Draco's shoulder.

“Gryffindors,” said Draco as he held him, one poisonous word, and that was all.

But it crystallized what Harry was feeling, and set him back into the world with a thump. He pushed at Draco until his boyfriend let him go in puzzlement, and stepped back, and looked up at Snape.

“They’re right,” he said quietly.

Snape narrowed his eyes at him. “What do you mean?”

Harry sighed. “They’re right that I have to help them. They’re not exactly right that no one else will fight for them, but I’m the only one who’s sworn an oath to do so. Old oath, remember? Turns my blood to molten silver if I don’t help?” He smiled slightly at Snape. “So their plan worked in that respect. I have to use my political power to fight for them. And their situation is different than most other magical creatures’. Dobby wanted to be free and journey wherever he liked, and I had to give that to him. The centaurs wanted to go on living in the Forbidden Forest and help me with the war effort, even with—” His gaze went to the head Draco had set aside. “Even with things like that. The werewolves want to be part of the only society where they can really survive. If that’s their will, then I need to help them achieve it.”

Snape was scowling as if someone had tricked him into swallowing a cauldron full of Calming Draught. “Even though Lupin is a traitor?” he all but spat.

Harry winced. “I didn’t know how much he cared about his people,” he said quietly. “But he deserves the right to his own life, doesn’t he, his own concerns? He’s not just my ally, not just my parents’ friend.” He glanced sideways at Draco. “I couldn’t ask Draco to give up being a Malfoy just because he loves me.”

“This is a bit different, Harry,” said Draco, all but radiating fury. “My being a Malfoy doesn’t involve my betraying you.”

"I know." Harry turned back to Snape. "Thank you for finding out about this, sir. Now that I know this Loki is trying to manipulate me, and that the werewolves are willing to bite people to achieve their goals, I know better how to act. But I can't abandon them all just because Remus betrayed me and some of them have stupid ideas. I can't tar them all with the same brush."

"You do realize," said Snape, his voice going deadly soft, "that some of your allies might think you were lying if you do not do what you promised you would, and make Remus politically powerless for acting against your principles?"

Harry closed his eyes and nodded. "Yes, I know," he said. "And that's—something I'll need to handle. First, though, I'll need to find out how deep it goes, whether any of the other werewolves in the alliance know about it, and whether Remus is willing to just give up associating with me. After all, sir," he added, opening his eyes and focusing on Snape, "if this is supposed to be completely in the daylight, I'd also have to tell him how I knew. Would I have to turn you out of the alliance for using Legilimency on him?"

"Do not be ridiculous, Harry."

"But it's something I have to think about," said Harry, as calmly as he could with the knowledge that Firenze had died for him and Remus had betrayed him weighing on his mind. "The ethics of it are delicate. I'm hoping that Remus will be happy with the political help I am willing to give, and will understand when I outline the kinds I won't. If not, then yes, I'll make sure that he can't interfere with the alliance. But I haven't even talked to him. I have no idea what he'll say."

"Isn't it enough that he tried to manipulate you?" Draco's arms draped over his shoulders again. "I would be angry just given that."

"So am I," said Harry, touching his cheek in reassurance. "But I won't shove him into the same category as Dumbledore, either, not until I have answers."

"Will you go to him now?" Snape asked. "I wish to be with you when you do."

“No.” Harry gathered up Firenze’s head again. “Now I have to call Millicent back to school, since she’s my official representative to the centaurs, and make sure that she’s free to go with me when I deliver this.”

“It’s wasteful,” Millicent said for the fourth time since Harry had summoned her and she’d agreed to Floo to Hogwarts. Her voice was disgusted.

Harry nodded as they walked along the main path of the Forbidden Forest, towards one of the clearings where he often met the centaurs. “I have no idea what Karkaroff hoped to accomplish with it, really,” he said quietly. “Now we know that the giants are fighting on Voldemort’s side, when he could have kept that a horrible secret. And Karkaroff has to know that this is hardly going to make me back off from the war and sit in a corner tearing my hair.”

“Most Death Eaters do extravagant wasteful things all the time,” said Millicent. “So long as they’re grotesque or cause mayhem, they really don’t care.”

“How’s your father?”

Millicent gave him a grim little smile, to say that she appreciated the ironic springboard Harry had used into the subject. “Well enough,” she said. “My mother’s found a spell that mostly conceals the smell of the wound. I hope it continues working. Talk about another extravagant, wasteful gesture. The Fisher King Curse really does smell terrible.”

Harry nodded. Then he paused, as he became aware of hoofbeats traveling parallel to him through the underbrush. He was surprised at how long it had taken the centaurs to approach, really. Maybe they had been unable to imagine why he would walk through the woods with Firenze’s head in his arms.

Magorian appeared, shaking his tail and staring steadily at Harry for a moment before he turned to Millicent. “Greetings, stone-bearer,” he said. “What news do you have for us?”

Millicent dipped her head. "Greetings, leader," she said. "I am sad to say that Firenze will run no more. A Death Eater named Karkaroff who was also sent to negotiate with the giants cut his head off and returned it to Harry this morning."

Magorian nodded slowly. Harry looked up at him, and watched the shadow of his dark head crowned by branches thick with budding leaves. That's what Firenze was supposed to look like, he thought, even though Magorian's coat was considerably darker than the other centaur's had been, and he was taller. If he had stayed here, he would be alive still.

Harry swallowed several times. It was hard to remind himself, even though he had determined to think of it that way, that Firenze had chosen his fate of his own free will, that he had wanted to help Harry with trying to secure allies. Neither he nor Harry could have known that Karkaroff was with the giants and would do this.

"Vates?" Magorian made it a demand and a plea at once.

Harry looked up at him again. "I am sorry," he whispered. "For your loss, and for the fact that Firenze was free for such a short time before his death." He looked down into the face cut with Karkaroff's obscene letters. "I would bring him back if I can. But I cannot. All I can do is bring his head home, and tell you that I would have given anything for this to be different." He knelt, gently lowering the head to the earth.

For a moment, it sat there like some strange plant rooting in the soil. Then Magorian stooped and picked it up, his strong arms making the burden seem a slight weight. "Thank you, vates," he said. "It has been centuries since wizards in general have wished any fate for us other than the one our web dictated. Your sorrow is sincere, and Firenze chose his path, and did not know where it would end. It is enough." He reared, and a strange cry, half- neigh and half-whistle, exploded from his mouth.

Harry started as a pair of centaurs he'd never seen before, short and wizened with white coats and hair, emerged abruptly from the trees

on either side of the path. They linked their arms with Magorian's, and turned to guide him and the head away into the Forest.

"Your aid has been welcome, vates," said Magorian over his shoulder. "But we must ask that you excuse us for our funeral rites. No human has witnessed them, and no human ever will. Be assured that we still intend to aid you in this war. We have suffered a loss along with you now."

Harry nodded, and stood there watching until they plunged out of sight. It took a much shorter time than it would have in winter, since the trees and thickening flowers swallowed them quickly. One last flirt of one of the white centaurs' tails, and they were gone.

Millicent put a hand on his arm. "Are you well, Harry?"

Harry turned around and gave her a faint smile. "Fine. Just thinking about what I'll have to do next." That was confront Remus, and it gave him a sickening churning sensation in his stomach. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and said, "Thank you for coming at such short notice."

"You may always call on the Bulstrodes," said Millicent, with unexpected conviction. "You've certainly done enough for us." She paused, and then added, "Besides, we've invested so much of ourselves in the alliance already. We deserve something out of it, I think."

Harry laughed, it was that unexpected, and felt his heart lighten a little, Remus or no Remus.

Harry took a deep breath and rapped on the door to Remus's quarters. He'd put this off as long as he could, first telling McGonagall what had been in the package he'd received, and then going over some of the plans for Midsummer with her, and then reading in one of the books he'd retrieved from the Black library about phoenix fire, and then persuading Snape and Draco that he could face Remus on his own and he didn't think Remus would attack him, or, Merlin forbid, bite him.

Remus opened the door at once. From the look on his face, he'd been expecting Harry, though not alone.

"I figured out that Severus must have read my thoughts from the sneer on his face at lunch," he said, before Harry could speak. "Come in, Harry. There are certain things that we both need to understand."

Harry couldn't help the slight bristling those words provoked along his spine, though he reminded himself that, even if Remus was arrogant and had been stupid, that was still no reason to think all werewolves were. He stepped inside, and Remus shut the door and turned to face him.

He also let the masks slip from his expression. Harry found himself looking at a man he almost didn't know, a man who had been pursuing some grand passion while Harry pursued his.

And he never told me?

Did I ever ask?

Harry felt a momentary deep sadness shift through him, a frustration that he couldn't understand everything about the people who mattered to him and couldn't help them in their every endeavor. He had already been forced to prioritize wizards, he thought. He had said that Draco and Snape were more important to him than others. Would he be forced to prioritize causes, too? Would he think that helping Remus was less important than accomplishing other goals?

It looked as if he would have to, and even as he faced the choice head-on, Harry hated it. No one had said he had to like this part.

"Sit down," said Remus courteously, and Harry took one of the three chairs in the room, watching Remus narrowly all the while. Remus practically shone with nervous energy. He sat down himself, but only for a moment. Then he sprang up and walked about, his hand skimming the walls.

"Why?" Harry asked his back.

Remus tensed, and then turned around. "Because my year in the Sanctuary taught me to trust myself," he said. "I did try to keep my anger under control, but I was no longer afraid of releasing it. And I did try to act both for werewolves and for you as long as I could, but now the point's come where we part paths, Harry, and for that I am truly sorry."

The man Harry remembered was looking out of his amber eyes, gentle and mild with remorse. Harry sat on his resentment. It appeared that Remus was going to explain logically. Harry thought he was wrong, but, no doubt, Remus thought that about him. If he did have good reasons for his actions, Harry would be happy to hear them.

"Why?" he repeated.

"Because it's never going to get better if we don't do something," Remus said, a snarl growing in the back of his voice. "I've watched the newspapers over the past several months, Harry. There have been other front page stories, but hidden in the back of the Daily Prophet is often something about werewolves: letters from wizards saying they don't trust us, speculations about whether Wolfsbane Potion actually works, interviews with people from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures saying they had to hunt down such and such a rogue werewolf in a certain part of London, when it was probably someone's dog. And I've gone back and read some of the older stories, too, the ones that first proposed anti-werewolf laws and the records of the ones passed.

"They've only been pushing against us, Harry, never allowing us breathing space. They took away our right to speak in court first, our voices. Then they removed our ability to have custody of children. Because, of course, we're an evil influence." He spat the words, and snapped his teeth after them. "Then they took away our ability to work. That old law about werewolves not having wands was brought up again, and started being enforced. And since then, they've been chipping away at all we have left, our freedom and our lives.

"Sure, the lucky ones of us can afford Wolfsbane Potion, but the price of that is rising, too."

Harry blinked. He honestly hadn't noticed. "It is?"

Remus snorted and glanced at him. "Of course. Since the suppliers of the ingredients have figured out that the demand is growing, they've raised the price. And demiguise hair is particularly expensive, because there are people agitating for us to leave the peaceful, innocent demiguises alone." Remus folded his arms around his middle and closed his eyes. "I used to laugh over the fact that so many people love animals like unicorns and demiguises, while they don't care that much about beasts they think are ugly. It doesn't seem that funny, now that they've decided werewolves are among the ugly ones."

"You could have come to me," Harry said. "I would have done something."

"What?" Remus opened his eyes and stared at him bleakly. "What could you have done? The demiguises are magical creatures too, Harry, so it's not as though we can ask you to champion our interests over theirs. And you won't use your magic to compel people into lowering the price of ingredients. And my wolf—" Remus flinched, and Harry suspected that the mere mention of the word had called the hateful, blood-filled voice to the surface of his mind. "My wolf is intelligent," Remus said softly. "You know that. All the werewolf webs are. Are you going to kill them, Harry? Are you going to bind them? You'll slice all the other webs, but they aren't living creatures in their own right. These are, and they're self-aware."

Harry clenched his hand. "None of that explains why you're spreading the web to other people," he said.

"Because it's the only weapon we have," said Remus. "They won't listen to us, they don't think we're beautiful, they don't even pity us most of the time. The only thing we can do is make them fear us. No, that might not bring the change we want, but waiting quietly won't, either. The last three decades have proven that. And I think—and most of the werewolves in southern England think—that the time is coming when we must act or die."

"It was still wrong." Harry leaned forward and stared intently into Remus's eyes. "I do consider that a betrayal, Remus."

"And you are too bound among other concerns to see things the way we do," Remus said. He never looked away from Harry. "It's admirable, Harry, the way that you try to balance all these concerns, but it won't work in this situation. Our enemies aren't going to change their minds. They fear us too much; they would even if Loki hadn't decided to move. And you won't oppose them." Bitterness flecked Remus's voice. "You won't oppose them, and you won't oppose them, until they clamp the collars around our necks. And even then you'll only wring your hands—sorry, hand—and say that you had to change their minds by persuasion, not force."

"So you decided to force me to use force?" Harry asked.

Remus inclined his head. "We can at least set the pace of our own destruction, if destruction it's going to be," he said. "And I don't think it will be, not now. If we provoke the Ministry into moving carelessly, then you'll defend us. We've watched you, Harry, closely. The only time you use your magic without remorse, without flinching, is when someone else's life, rather than will, is in danger. Protect us, get involved in the debate on our side, and then you'll go ahead with putting our interests first. It's the only way."

"Has it ever occurred to you that I'm less likely to do that now that you've chosen to go about things this way?" Harry rose to his feet, feeling his magic stir around him like wings. "That I wouldn't appreciate manipulation? That I might be so disgusted at the fact that you've chosen to bite other people, and play to the stereotypes most wizards have of you, that I would turn my back on your cause?"

"Honestly, no," said Remus. "We know you too well, Harry. When they come for us, we know that you'll be there—if only to stop the conflict from exploding into a bloody war. You'll defend the innocent. True, you might let the werewolves who bite others perish. But you'll protect those who can't protect themselves, and there are more of those than there are wizards, because we're less powerful than they are." His eyes shone.

Harry nodded at the wand that lay on the table near Remus's hand. "You're a wizard, too, Remus."

Remus slowly bared his teeth. "Am I, Harry? Am I? Tell that to the Wizengamot. Technically, you know, I'm not even supposed to have the wand, or this job, and as long as I were starving to death in peace and silence, like a good little puppy, they wouldn't care what happened to me, wand or not."

"So you'll let them define you?" Harry shook his head, and behind him, his magic made his chair vibrate in frustration. "You are, with the biting and the violence. I thought better of you than that, Remus."

"That's all philosophy, Harry." Remus waved a dismissive hand. "We've tried that, and tried that, and that doesn't work. We've made the decision, or the werewolves who follow Loki have made the decision. And his are the wolves who are going to be taking the risks, letting themselves be arrested."

"Does Mrs. Parkinson know about this?" Harry asked.

Remus shook his head. "No. Nor Delilah or Claudia, before you can ask. They're becoming part of my pack, but none of them are London werewolves, or know many of the traditions of a pack yet. I didn't tell them, because I didn't want to chance them making an uncomfortable choice."

"Or revealing the plan to me before Loki was ready to move," Harry said.

Remus nodded.

"Why are you telling me the plan now?" Harry asked. "Surely you wanted to keep it secret?"

"Because you know some of the reasons already," said Remus. "And when I realized Severus had read my thoughts, I spoke to Loki. He gave me permission to do this. He was never that happy about keeping the secret from you. He did think of approaching you, until he realized that you wouldn't kill the webs, and that you had too many

conflicting interests to help us without a little push. Your oath was a blessing.”

“What sort of person is Loki? It sounds like he’s sacrificing his wolves,” Harry said, wondering if that was the right tack to take. Perhaps the sacrificial angle was the way to wake Remus up. He had rejected Dumbledore when he had finally been able to see how much his sacrifices cost.

“Willing sacrifices, Harry,” Remus said. “The same thing you did to lift the centaurs’ web. A pack is—a pack. All the people helping Loki know his mind exactly, and they all agreed to do it. Those who didn’t have retreated into their own packs, and have been kept ignorant of what he chose. They’ll be benefited by it ultimately, though.”

“Has it even occurred to him that he could end up spending hundreds of lives and changing nothing?”

Remus smiled slightly. “Of course it has. But there’s a reason he chose the name Loki, Harry. He’s a chaos-rider. He’s like Draco, actually: an expert in shaping a wild situation to his advantage. He acts and reacts faster than most of his opponents can. He’s confident that he can snatch victory out of this volcano.”

Harry stared at Remus for a long moment. Remus looked back, and it became obvious to Harry that he wasn’t about to change his mind, wasn’t about to look back down his path and see that it was wrong, wasn’t about to see the tidal wave of blood that could drown them all.

“I’m going to cut you out of the alliance,” Harry said softly.

“I know,” Remus said.

“I resent this,” said Harry. He realized he was shaking. “I’m disappointed in you.”

“I know,” Remus repeated.

"You know that trying to compel me is the worst course you could have chosen?" Harry asked. "When I'm a vates, and respect free will above all?"

"But you aren't our vates, because you can't benefit us as a vates," Remus said, his voice and face both very gentle. He even looked aside from Harry a little, as if he thought the eye contact too challenging. "I said that already, Harry. You'll never break our webs. Will you?"

Harry gave an irritated shrug. "I hadn't thought about it," he whispered. Could he bring himself to kill another species, which was essentially what the werewolf webs were? The best solution would be to transfer them elsewhere, but if they didn't want to go, what would he do then?

"And you have too many other considerations waiting for you on your path," said Remus. "It's all right. We understand that, Harry. That's why we chose to step back and act outside of the vates requirements. It's no use approaching you like the centaurs or the unicorns did, anyway."

What a bloody fucking mess, Harry thought tiredly. "The betrayal does feel personal," he told Remus, and saw his eyes shut this time.

"For that, I am sorrier than you can know," Remus whispered. "But we value different things, Harry."

Harry stepped out of the room and shut the door behind him. The next day, he scanned the Daily Prophet grimly when it came to the table, determined to see what secrets might be hiding among the stories he'd ignored. He paused on a story about the rising price of demiguise hair, and read about a group that, as Remus had said, was agitating to protect demiguises and prevent their hair from being shipped out of China and Japan at all. He also paused on one of the objects in "Cheshire's Curiosities Column," more shaken than he had expected it to be.

And for our final mysterious account today, we present the story of one Fiona Mallory, 37, a former Auror, found in a trance in her

London flat. Investigating personnel from the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes state that the trance is apparently the result of an illegal Dark magic object, but have been unable to locate the object, and so unable to wake her. Mallory's breathing is calm, her eyes fixed, and her body preserved as though by Still-Beetle. If anyone has any information on what object may have caused Miss Mallory's unusual state, they are encouraged to contact the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes at once.

Harry put down the paper and rubbed the gooseflesh that appeared on his arms. Had Mallory been the victim of someone wanting to punish her for her torture of Lily and James? Why not just kill her, though, if that was the case? Or perhaps she'd stolen a Dark Arts object when she was sacked from the Ministry, and been careless in how she used it?

He closed his eyes and sat back. The world seemed to be tumbling out of control around him, and he badly needed some kind of firm footing back under him. He couldn't trust Remus, Connor wasn't here right now, Draco would be glad to help but didn't know much more than Harry himself did, if as much, McGonagall was busy with the need to re-ward the school, and Snape—

I don't know if I can trust Snape yet, not fully.

Well, that was something, wasn't it? And he had some time to handle it, the two weeks of Easter holiday.

Harry's eyes snapped open. He knew Vera was still staying in the school, though he had only spoken with her three times since the New Year. Apparently, her gift hadn't yet overcome her and forced her to go back to the Sanctuary. He would ask Snape if he would be willing to speak to her. If not, then he would ask Snape to talk with him in private.

I need to be able to trust Snape. He's an adult, he has contacts and means of gathering information that I don't, and he sees angles and shadows I don't. I would never have suspected that Remus was involved in this stupid werewolf situation if he hadn't told me. But even then, I was angry at his using Legilimency on Remus, and I had

to wonder if his dislike of him was part of the reason he read his mind at all.

It's time to have out the things we didn't talk about after I rescued him from the Chamber of Secrets. I want my guardian back completely. And it's the best step I can take now, for his mental health, and mine, and the war.

Chapter Seventy-Eight: Snape, Harry, and Their Issues

“Sir?”

Snape looked up sharply. Harry was peering at him around the corner of his office door, his face set politely but implacably, as if he were going to drag Snape off and make him reconcile with the werewolf. He carefully put down the Potions text he'd been reviewing to remind him of the uses of dragon's blood and turned around to stare at his ward.

“What do you have in your head this time?” he asked bluntly. When I know that he's going to have me doing something mad anyway, I should know what it is as soon as possible, so that I can protect both of us from the consequences of his stupidity.

“That I'm really fucking tired of not being able to trust you,” said Harry cheerfully, and stepped into the office, pulling the door shut behind him. Snape experienced a spasm of alarm for the volatile Potions ingredients around the walls, but Harry didn't pay any attention to them, instead staring intently at Snape's face. “That I'm really fucking tired of you not being able to trust me, even to do something as basic as take care of myself or test my own magic without a guard sitting by just in case I light something on fire.”

“You did light yourself on fire last time,” said Snape darkly. He was not about to let Harry forget that.

“Yes, but I didn't mean to,” Harry said, and then paused and shook his head before resuming the same slightly manic cheerfulness. “And I didn't come here to talk to you about this, not yet. I wanted to ask if you would go to Vera, the Seer, and let her look at our souls as she speaks to us.”

Snape choked. Then he said, “The werewolf has hexed you. It can't be Imperio, because you can throw that off. Hold eye contact, Harry, so that I can make sure it isn't something else that affects the mind. Perhaps it only affects the mouth, and you are silently berating yourself for saying such a ridiculous thing. There are potions that turn all one's words to nonsense—“

"Is it really that ridiculous a suggestion?" Harry sounded both exasperated and offended. "This is why we need her. You still think that no one else would want to see your soul."

"I know what my soul looks like." Snape scowled at Harry, a scowl he knew was truly horrible; it had frightened Lupin this morning, when he met the werewolf coming out of the Headmistress's office. McGonagall had apparently told Lupin that he must leave the school, that she would not trust him to act as Head of Gryffindor House any more. Lupin had been angry enough that his eyes were glowing amber, and yet he had shrunk when he saw Snape. "I see no reason to have anyone else poking and prying about in it. Imagine a swamp of pitch at high midnight, Harry, and you will have my soul."

"You know that's not true," said Harry patiently, "or you would never care about anyone else but yourself. You've changed, and I think it's time to see how much. Will you come with me to Vera or not?"

Snape snarled between his teeth. "Not willingly."

Harry eyed him for a moment, then nodded. "All right. Come and talk to me in your quarters, then." He glanced at the Potions ingredients on the walls for the first time. "I wouldn't want to corrupt any of your experiments, or damage future ones, with the amounts of magic I'll probably be leaking."

"What will we talk about?" Snape asked. He became aware that he was clutching the Potions text like a shield as he stood, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Harry knew this would make him vulnerable. Harry had seen him more vulnerable, when the pain in his leg was a screaming thing and not a gnawing, persistent ache.

"Why we can't trust each other," said Harry, looking fully into his eyes. "Why I'm still upset at you for taking the information about my parents and Dumbledore to the Ministry. Why you don't trust me to stay by myself for an hour without bursting into flame. That kind of thing."

Snape looked steadily at him. Harry showed no sign of backing down or glancing away. Snape was not sure what had brought this on—the

conversation with the werewolf, which Harry hadn't sketched to him in more than details, should not have—but it was apparent that they were going to have this conversation now or later. And putting it off until later might result in Harry showing up at his door with the Seer next time, and letting her look at Snape's soul before Snape could stop it.

"Very well," said Snape, hoping his voice sounded ungracious and neither hopeful nor angry. "My rooms." He swept out of the office, letting Harry have a full-on view of his set back, and not his pale face or tightly clutching hands.

Harry let Snape choose his seat when they entered his rooms. Harry had been the one to abruptly show up and demand that they do this. It was only fair that he should choose the ground.

Snape decided to sit on the couch in front of the fire, perhaps so he could feel the comforting warmth at his back, perhaps so that Harry would have to sit in the smaller and more vulnerable chair. Harry didn't really mind. What mattered to him most was that they were finally going to talk about this, and, Vera or no Vera, they weren't leaving until they'd built up a new foundation of trust or repaired the damaged one.

"Sir," said Harry, when he was seated. "What do you want to talk about first?"

Snape stared at him in silence for a long time. Then he said, "Why don't you tell me the major reason that you still don't trust me? I had thought you did, Harry, after the Chamber."

Harry sighed and rubbed his eyes with his hand. "I thought it at least repaired enough that we didn't need to do this," he admitted. "Then I realized, yesterday, that I assumed automatically that you'd used Legilimency on Remus because you hate him, not because you thought it would help or protect me."

"That is wrong." Snape's voice had gone flat.

"I know." Harry lowered his hand to his lap and gave Snape an apologetic look. "But it's one of those things you need to talk about. Is there anyone else whose mind you would have read so willingly, sir? That's alive, I mean? I could see you reading Sirius's mind, or Dumbledore's, if you could get past his own Legilimency. But would you read the Headmistress, or Flitwick, on the off-chance that they were hiding something unpleasant in their thoughts?"

"This was more than an off-chance."

Harry waited, but Snape didn't elaborate. It seemed that he would have to do all the work, at least for this part of the conversation. Well, he had expected no less. He wanted his guardian back, and his guardian was quite content to squat in the hole he'd dug for himself like a toad. Harry would pull the toad out.

"Would you have asked permission from the Headmistress, first, before you read her thoughts?" he asked. "From Professor Flitwick? From Professor Sprout?"

Snape stared straight at him, this time without a scowl, without any expression at all. Harry waited. Snape often used silence to unnerve students and make them confess their crimes before they were ready. But it could be used on him, too, and Harry knew his conviction—at this point—to be greater than Snape's. He waited, and Snape cracked.

"There is no one else who would be so dangerous!" he snarled at last. "There is no one else who has a curse that he can spread to anyone in the school with a single bite! And Minerva agrees with me, Harry. She dismissed Lupin this morning, and told me that she could not have a Head of Gryffindor who was dedicated to something else more than he was dedicated to the safety of the school."

Harry winced. He had known that McGonagall would do something like that, but he had not expected it so soon. He drew in a deep breath, and reminded himself that Remus would be all right. He'd set that Gringotts account up for him, after all, and Remus could live out of it.

But it's more than that. It's the symbolism of things. McGonagall just dismissed the one werewolf who's ever been welcome at Hogwarts. He now has no job. Even if he wasn't being paid in anything other than food and clothes and Wolfsbane Potion, the fact that he could live around and with other wizards is an important signal that some of us are accepting of werewolves.

Harry told himself that that wasn't the issue right now; his conversation with Snape was, and Snape had likely only brought this up at all to distract him. Harry recognized the gambit. He'd used it himself countless times, especially when he wanted Narcissa Malfoy to stop worrying about him; he had only to bring up Draco, and she was involved in considering what her beloved baby boy wanted and needed, with fewer concerns about Harry himself. Harry kept a determinedly pleasant expression on his face. "So you admit that you would not have mind-read anyone else except Remus without at least asking first."

"It has nothing to do with him being a Marauder," said Snape quickly, his face gone dark. "It has everything to do with him being a danger to you. You forget, I treated Dumbledore the same way."

"And Dumbledore was a Gryffindor and a friend of the Marauders," said Harry, with a nod, "the one who kept them in school when they should have been expelled for hurting you."

Snape started to answer, and then paused, staring at him.

Harry figured out the cause of that stare a moment later. "Of course I don't think that what they did to you was right!" he snapped. "Honestly, sir, you've grown so used to being alone with your grievances that I think you've forgotten other people can sympathize with them. I would have done what I could to make sure that Sirius and James paid for that. There's only the little matter of my not having been born at the time, you see."

Snape recovered himself at the sarcasm. "Dumbledore was a menace," he said, "at least where Slytherin students were concerned. And, in the last years, he was a menace to you. And so was Lupin."

“Then you could have gone to the Headmistress, and told her what you knew without benefit of Legilimency,” said Harry. “Besides, I think we were discussing something else, sir. Do you really think that no one would ever agree that your almost dying or becoming infected by a werewolf was wrong?”

“Precious few people have ever been in sympathy with it.” Snape stared down his nose at him as if Harry were Connor instead of himself. “Dumbledore and Minerva both refused to even consider expulsion for Black or Potter. Minerva took House points and gave detention, and that is all. And Dumbledore told me that I should try to understand what would have led them to play that prank, that I should try to make more friends and be kinder.” Bitterness choked his voices like ashes in a chimney.

“Then I understand why you hated them so much,” said Harry. “But do you really think the Headmistress hasn’t changed in the twenty years since, sir?”

“It is not her I am concerned about.” Snape flicked a hand in dismissal. “I am concerned with the fact that Lupin was a danger to you.”

“Because he was a Marauder.”

“Because he was a danger to you.” Snape stared at him pointedly. “Have you forgotten, Harry, that he suspected what was happening to you for a long time before he tried to do something about it? And even then, what he did was attack Black the moment he was free, not comfort you or apologize to you. The beast inside him wanted flesh. If he understands human emotions such as compassion, there is precious little evidence of it. Simply because he was mild, everyone assumed he was kind. I think that is false.”

“You go too far,” said Harry softly, narrowing his eyes. He almost wished he could have brought Snape to his conversation with Remus yesterday after all, even though he would have had to put Snape under a Silencing Charm to get anything productive said. “Remus was genuinely upset about having to betray me yesterday—“

“He did not have to betray you, Harry.” Snape’s voice now sounded like rain pounding on gravel. “He is weak, and always has been. He has only decided that he should give in to the beast now, instead of hiding from it. That is the only difference—”

“He chose,” said Harry. “I hate what he chose. I disagree with it. I hate that he thinks biting other people is all right. But you—you’re making it sound as if he was compelled to pick the path of rage and murder because he isn’t human.”

“He is not!”

Harry blinked a few times. The only sound for the next few moments was Snape’s harsh breath, rasping in and out of his lungs as if he had run a race. Harry sat, and thought, as best as he could in front of a prejudice he hadn’t even been suspecting he’d dig up.

“Well,” he said at last. “That explains a lot.”

Snape turned away from him, moving one hand absently through his hair. His bad leg trembled, and Harry felt a momentary twinge of sadness, that that wound would probably indicate Snape’s vulnerability for a long time—and not just by limiting his movement, the way it did now.

“Sir—”

“It is true,” said Snape lowly, never looking up. “Werewolves are not human, Harry. They are slaves of the beasts inside.” Harry might have believed him if not for the tremor underlying his voice. Snape wasn’t saying this in an effort to convince Harry about Remus. He was saying this because—

“Merlin,” Harry breathed. “You’re afraid of him. You’re afraid of all of them, and you haven’t wanted anyone to know.”

Snape’s gaze snapped to him. Harry saw anger and terror mixing there like crunching shards of glass. Snape’s façade had been utterly destroyed. Harry shook his head in silence, and asked his next question before he could think better of it.

“How in the world did you survive spying? You would have had to work beside Fenrir Greyback.”

Snape rebuilt his mask in a few places, though his voice still shook when he spoke. “Greyback followed Voldemort’s orders and did not bite fellow Death Eaters in human form. I trusted him to be terrified of the Dark Lord. If he’d touched me, he would have been deprived of the pleasure of future kills. And I could easily request to hunt elsewhere on full moon nights. The Dark Lord was—aware of what had happened to me because of Lupin. He even approved of my beliefs, because while he used werewolves, he considered them tainted. They are beasts to him. He may use Muggleborns, too, but that does not mean he will not kill and enslave them in the end.”

Harry nodded, understanding his mentor better than he had now. Snape hated feeling helpless. If he had a true and genuine fear, it would not be surprising that he concealed it for his life and never acknowledged that it was terror driving him. And, of course, while Dumbledore was alive, he would have had to hide his distaste if he wanted to work under a Headmaster who didn’t think werewolves were monsters.

But McGonagall’s already shown she’s different. Now, it’s a belief that’s going to cause him problems if he works with me.

“It must have cost you much to go into the Woodhouse battle on a full moon night,” he said.

Snape shook his head slightly. “The werewolves were in a different part of the valley, and under Wolfsbane. And by the time we realized it was an ambush and that we could actually be facing werewolves there, I believe that Greyback and his consort were already dead.” He sat silent for a moment, and then added, “And with you there, Harry, I could turn my terror into rage for your safety. I’ve always been good at transmuting fear into anger, in any case.”

“I know.” Harry took a deep breath. “But, sir, now you’ll have to find a different set of tactics. I’m going to be working beside werewolves often as I try to find a solution for their problems, and that means

you'll be brought into contact with people you fear and hate often. I want you to know that I do sympathize with what happened to you because of James and Sirius, but I think that your prejudice against werewolves is wrong, stupid, and counterproductive."

"They are beasts," said Snape. "I say nothing, Harry, about it being their fault that they were bitten. The werewolves like Greyback are rare. I know that. But it changes them, the bite. Just as someone under the Imperius Curse may cause a great deal of damage that is not directly their fault, they will bring blood and ruin down if you work with them."

Harry sighed. "You don't think you can overcome this?"

Snape stared at him haughtily. "I don't see why I should have to. My attitude is the more reasonable and sensible one."

"You will have to because of me," Harry told him. "I can assign you elsewhere, the way Voldemort did, but I know you won't always want that, because of your desire to be at my side protecting me. Sooner or later, you'll have to deal with a situation where you're fighting beside me and werewolves are fighting beside me, in wolf form, even. Can you take that?"

Snape shut his eyes and said nothing for a long moment. Then he said, "I will try."

"Thank you," said Harry softly. He was still a bit shaken in the wake of Snape's deep hatred and deep fear. He had not sensed a trace of that in Snape for so long. Of course, Snape was a master Occlumens, skilled at feeling only those emotions he wanted to feel—and it was possible that he had shown signs of it, and Harry had dismissed them as merely hatred for a Marauder, a companion of James Potter. Harry was desperately glad to have discovered this weakness now, rather than in the middle of battle.

Of course, he thought, as Snape opened his eyes and turned to face him, that means that he's going to strike back, try to equalize the secrets that are shared and spread around today.

"I have answered your questions," Snape said, voice almost normal. "And I want you to answer one of mine."

Harry inclined his head.

"Why are you still so angry at me for filing child abuse charges against your parents and Dumbledore?" Snape asked quietly.

Harry felt himself freeze up for a moment. But Snape had shown incredible courage in admitting his own fear; could he show less? He lifted his head and said, "I don't entirely disagree with what you did, now that I've had some months to think about it. I can see factors that I couldn't when I was closer to the situation. I agree that Dumbledore should have gone to trial for what happened to Peter, at the least. And Connor could have filed charges against Lily for quiet abuse. That's one of the few regrets I have in killing Dumbledore, you know?" he added. "That he did not come to trial. I think Peter did deserve to have everyone know he was cleared directly, instead of indirectly through his testimony in my trial."

"And James?" Snape kept his voice neutral on the name, which Harry was sure must have taken a deal of effort.

Harry winced. Then he plunged forward, and said, "I—I tend to think that the child abuse charges you filed against him were still mostly a means of revenge, sir. I know you said that they weren't. But without those charges of neglect, there was really nothing to arrest him for. You could have secured Dumbledore and Lily from doing any more damage to me, or anyone else, by telling the Minister of the crimes they'd committed against other people. You chose that route instead, and I often think it was merely to include James in the smearing."

He looked up to see Snape watching him in silence. It seemed to be puzzled silence. Harry was vaguely surprised. He would have expected his guardian to at once begin denying that he'd done anything against James in the name of revenge; he'd said so before.

Then Snape said, "You still don't think your child abuse should ever have been exposed, do you?" His voice was soft and amazed.

Harry bit his lip. Then he said, "I know you did it to protect me. And I agree that they deserved justice for their crimes. But I would have preferred if we could have done something in private that would have protected me and given them justice for their crimes. I agree that you would have had to take charge of it. I really wasn't thinking straight at that point." He produced a smile, hoping Snape would smile back. He didn't. Harry pushed forward. "I didn't want anyone to know I had been abused. I agree everything else had to happen, now, though, as I said, I'm still suspicious about your motives for including James. But the exposure of that particular crime didn't need to happen."

"Why not, Harry?"

"I just—I didn't want it to."

"Why not, Harry?"

Harry sat back and closed his eyes. He was concentrating on holding his magic so that it wouldn't make his chair explode. "Because."

"Why not, Harry?"

"Because WHO CARES?"

Harry shouted that last, and then dropped back into his chair, panting. Snape said nothing at all, and whether it was to fill up the silence or for some other reason, Harry found himself pouring out words.

"I just—I could have healed in private. The people who needed to know about it, Draco and you and Connor and the Malfoys, knew about it. We could have done something with my parents and Dumbledore to punish them for that crime in private, and then dragged them up before the public for everything else. Then there wouldn't be newspaper articles about me, and stupid, stupid interrogations with Madam Shiverwood, and people trying to use my gift for sacrifice against me. Everyone who needed to know already knew. And I can accept concern from you and Draco on that score—you love me, you know me personally—and I can accept Connor's anger, since he didn't know about it for a long time and I was trying to pretend, at that point, that at least James wasn't guilty. But everyone

else—I want them to go away. It's all going to go smash in the end if they don't look away. They have to see the principles I'm pushing forward, not me. They have to be willing to fight this war because of the idea that magical creatures deserve to be free and because they want to struggle against Voldemort, not because I'm the one leading them. It's like the difference between this—" he waved his severed left wrist "—as a symbol and as a source of concern for them. It's all right if they care about it because they think that Voldemort or his Death Eaters might inflict such horrible crimes on them. It's not all right if they think of it as something I suffered and want me to get another hand because of that.

"And it's the same thing with the trial. They could know that Dumbledore and Lily and James did evil things. They didn't have to know that those things were abuse of me. I don't want them to care too much. I can tolerate them looking at me as a symbol, as a leader, as a speaker, as a political player. Not as a victim."

He stopped speaking, and sat, empty and drained, for a long moment. Snape's voice flowed into the silence like water.

"Is that the reason you refuse to get another hand, Harry?"

Harry lifted his head and blinked at his guardian. "Yes," he said quietly. "Getting another one would be an admission that I think of myself as crippled, or that I deserve to be pitied. I don't want that."

"You think you have to be strong enough to bear any adversity?"

Harry frowned. "In public, yes." Isn't that obvious? "In private, I can relax around you and Draco, and admit things I wouldn't admit otherwise. But show me one leader who limps into battle with wounds bleeding all over him and asks for pity, and I'll show you someone who's going to die on the morrow—or in three seconds, if Voldemort is involved."

"I think you would find that not many people share your opinion," said Snape softly. "Wanting to be two-handed is not a pitiable thing, Harry, only a normal one."

“And one that makes me too human to them,” Harry countered. “I’m only practicing politics, sir, and you said Friday that you were happy to see my political instincts growing. Isn’t this another instance of it? Presenting a strong front in public, no matter what I feel like in private?”

Snape controlled his exasperation and his fondness, both. Harry wouldn’t respond well to either right now.

And at least it explains a good deal about him. I wonder, though, if he will want to hear that there will always be some people who follow him because of who he is, not what he preaches, and that his moments of weakness can be inspiring, because of how he bears up under them?

It didn’t matter if he liked it or not. Snape would be remiss to keep it from him while they were being honest. “If someone chooses to admire you for yourself, Harry,” he said, “that is something you cannot force him out of.”

“Who said anything about forcing?” Harry tossed his head like a nervous horse, a gesture Snape thought he might have picked up from Regulus. “I’m only trying to make sure that it doesn’t become a plague.”

Affection leaked into Snape’s voice before he could stop himself. “You are allowed to think about yourself, Harry. If you want a second hand, you are allowed to try to break the spells Bellatrix may have left on your wrist and replace it, rather than refuse it because you think all your attention has to go into the war and how you appear to other people.”

“I don’t think that,” Harry countered immediately. “After all, sir, I’m talking to you for a personal reason. I want to be able to trust you again.”

“So that I can also trust you,” said Snape. “So that you can also have someone who backs you in the war.”

Harry scowled at him.

“Will you think about getting yourself another hand?” Snape asked. “Not because of how it might look to others, but because you want one? If nothing else, it would be good practice for your courting ritual,” he added delicately, wondering why Draco had not told Harry this. Perhaps he had assumed Harry knew, or wanted it to be a surprise. “You are supposed to be thinking of your partner and yourself then, not the wider world.”

“I had guessed that,” said Harry. “And what makes you think that I want another hand?”

Snape raised his eyebrow.

Harry sighed. “Yes, all right, fine,” he said, in a voice that was not quite a snap. “But I don’t miss it as much as I would have expected. The pain has caused me more trouble, since Voldemort likes to use the memory of it to taunt me, and it was the one that Dumbledore used to capture me in Capto Horrifer.”

“Will you think about it?” Snape asked. He was perfectly aware that Harry had agreed only that he might want his left hand back, not to thinking about getting his left hand back. Harry could use conversational tricks like that in his sleep, but could rarely get past him.

Harry gave him a single glance like broken glass. “Yes, I will,” he said. “And if we’re into thinking about sensitive subjects, will you think about never using compulsion on Draco again?”

Masterfully turned, Harry, Snape had to admit, as he found himself once more on the defensive. “I did it in the first place because I wished Draco to have some interests independent of you,” he said carefully. “I knew the book would put a compulsion on him. I did not think it would be as damaging as it turned out to be, and certainly I did not think he would be able to brew that potion as fast as he did and summon his ancestor’s ghost on Halloween. I underestimated Draco’s skill in Potions.”

“None of that excuses you lying directly to me,” said Harry, eyes furious. At least they didn’t hold the same blank, dead rage that Snape had seen last Midsummer night, when Harry tried to choke him to death with magic. “And you can’t claim that you were protecting me this time. Why did you do it?”

“I think you know the answer to that one,” said Snape quietly. It would involve admitting to fear again if he said it, and he thought he had done enough of that in this conversation.

“I want to hear you say it again.”

“I feared that you would not trust me if you heard that I had used compulsion, no matter what the purpose,” said Snape. The words stung his lips as they slid across them, but at least, this time, Snape had had the choice to say them, and hadn’t had the confession forced from him the way his terror of werewolves had been. “And you needed an adult to trust at that point, Harry. It does come back to protecting you, no matter what you think.”

Harry raised his head and studied him in silence for a moment. Then he said, “You need to trust me more, sir. I hated you for the compulsion, of course I did, but more for the lie. If you’d just told me from the beginning that you wanted Draco to concentrate on something besides me and that the instrument you chose was ultimately too risky, I could have accepted that, because it would have been a mistake, not a calculated deception. You think I’m going to turn away from loving you at any moment, and that’s not true.”

Snape closed his eyes. He didn’t think that, of course he didn’t think that, it was too soppy to be a thing he would think—

But it was true. Why else hadn’t he told Harry about his Death Eater days, or shared how he knew so many of the wizards and witches who had been part of that first, failed meeting? Because he was afraid of Harry flinching away from him in disgust once he discovered some of the things Snape had done, both before and after he turned spy for the Light.

“Can you trust me that much?” Harry asked softly.

"I will try," said Snape. He knew it would be hard. He would be struggling against his own nature, after all, and the bitter lessons he'd learned so young that they never stuck him as cynical any more, simply the truth of the world. Everything he loved was snatched away. Everything he knew as good turned out to be an empty mask stretched over corruption. It had happened with his expectations about Hogwarts as a child, and the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore as the embodiment of Light. Someday, Snape knew, he would wake and find that Harry had gone, too, estranged from him forever by his own corruption.

A hand touched him, tilting his chin up and opening his eyes. Snape found himself looking directly into Harry's face.

And Harry had dropped the Occlumency barriers behind his eyes that usually contained his emotions, and opened the quicksilver pools.

Snape found himself swept into a mass of affection and love and admiration as strong as a riptide. Trust was a lesser current in it; as Harry had said, his ability to trust Snape had rather diminished since he brought the Potters and Dumbledore to trial. But it was still there, and Harry went on determinedly showing him the truth, strung between memories from the Chamber of Secrets all the way back to first year, that he loved Snape, valued him, and could trust him again fully, even if he did not now. He wouldn't let Snape throw that away just because of his own insecurities.

It was intolerable that he not respond to that, and with a gesture of equal respect and honor. So Snape opened his own Occlumency pools. Harry had time for a startled gasp before he tumbled into the emotions that swam there.

Fear. That was everywhere, Harry saw. Snape was afraid of losing him, afraid of finding out that he had driven Harry away forever, afraid that an enemy would catch and kill Harry one of these days when one of them wasn't quick enough, afraid that Harry would let threats get

close to him because he loved people and forgave them too much. Fear, bordering on terror.

Rage. That danced past as a curtain of fire, not blue and gold like phoenix fire, but a red so deep it was almost black, and thus, Harry thought, almost the deep green of the Slytherin colors. Snape hated most of the world that would threaten Harry. Oh, he might have valued Harry at first because of vengeance on James Potter and Dumbledore, there was no doubt of that, but it had changed since then. Now he hated Remus as a threat, Voldemort as a threat, the political players in the Ministry as a threat, and was quite prepared to hate Lucius Malfoy as a threat if he showed himself so. That mingled with the fear, and explained, Harry thought dazedly, why Snape was apparently incapable of letting him investigate his own phoenix fire alone.

Love. That drove Snape, too, but it wove through the rage and the terror in sparkling threads, and so Snape could easily pretend it was something else. The world took away love, butchered it and slit its throat. He saw it happen with Harry as well as everyone else. Why should he believe that he would be safe if he showed it?

Harry found himself laughing helplessly as he fell back into his body. He closed his eyes and buried his face in Snape's neck for a moment, embracing him, as he carefully rearranged his own Occlumency pools. He was sure that Snape was doing the same thing. It would have hurt for him to keep them open as long as he had.

"You can't put me in an egg, you know," Harry whispered. "You can't keep me safe from every danger."

"I know," Snape said, voice muffled. "But you understand why I want to?"

"Better than I have." Harry was a little dazed, but he could feel an edge of emotion skimming across his mind. Merlin. Is that what it's like, having a parent? Is that what a parent is?

Then maybe I can be a son.

He was not entirely sure yet; the emotion was still tentative, darting and diving and dodging and playing games with him. But he was hopeful, now. If Snape's emotions were some of what a parent might feel, then Harry thought his own emotions, which complemented them, might be what a son would feel.

Maybe. Oh, maybe.

He sat back at last, and opened his eyes, staring directly into Snape's, but not opening himself to Legilimency this time. The moment for that was past. He had given Snape reason to trust him. Time to see if it would work. "Can you trust me?" he asked quietly. "Not to abandon you because of some imagined sin, and to protect myself as well as you try to?"

Snape inclined his head just a hair. "I can," he said. "I know that you could not—would not wish to back away, or harm me, because of—what I saw."

Harry nodded, satisfied.

"And you?" Snape tilted his head in challenge, an old sneer flickering around the corners of his mouth. "Will you trust me not to worry unreasonably, and to do what I think is in the best interests of your safety, not out of old grudges or malice?"

"I think so," said Harry. "Yes. I can." He stared at Snape a moment more. He had to admit, he'd been humbled by the extent of Snape's fear for his life. He knew Draco felt much the same way, but Draco was in love with him, and Harry could accept that because he experienced the same extremes of rage and distress when Draco got threatened. He also wanted to protect Snape, but his fear wasn't exactly corresponding, because he trusted Snape to (mostly) protect himself. "Sir—you care more for me, and better for me, than my parents ever did," he said.

Snape's arms slid around him so abruptly, and squeezed so tightly, that Harry lost his breath. He leaned his head against Snape's chest for a moment, though, and accepted the embrace, then returned it.

“That,” Snape whispered, directly into his ear, “is a precious gift.”

Harry closed his eyes and said nothing. Another tentative emotion had come to skim across his mind, stronger than hope and more uplifting than humility: exaltation.

Oh, Merlin, I’ve got one person I can trust no matter what. I have someone to go to if everything, the werewolves and Draco and the battle on Midsummer and the revolution after it, gets to be too much. This is brilliant.

Chapter Seventy-Nine: Violent Dawns and Renewed Wards

Harry shaded his eyes with his hand, and carefully considered the golden light making its way from the east. He stood on top of the North Tower, which gave him the best view of the sunrise in Hogwarts, to see if what he'd noticed yesterday and the day before was really true.

Yes, he decided after a moment. The gold spilled across the sky in a distinct shape, flaming in the midst of all the clouds and gentler tracteries of pink and blue and orange. Harry supposed someone could have cast a spell to create the shape, but three mornings in a row seemed excessive, especially since the shape looked like it reached across half Scotland at the least.

The shape was a gryphon's wing.

Well, the wild Dark announced its presence with violent storms, Harry thought, stepping back from the edge of the Tower. I suppose it's not a surprise that the Light announces its presence with violent dawns. That comforted him, somewhat. It confirmed that there was a storm of Light coming, and Midsummer Day was, if not actually proclaimed by the prophecy, still the best guess for when it would arrive, since that was the day when the Light was most powerful. And it would definitely come to Hogwarts; the prophecy had said so.

Harry snorted, then. Snape would have something to say about him putting so much trust in Divination.

He turned to go back below—he wouldn't want to panic Draco by having his boyfriend wake up and find him gone—and started when he realized a cloaked figure was standing behind him. "Professor Lestrangle," he said with a small nod. "Is something wrong?"

Acies drifted past him and leaned on the Tower battlement, staring at the eastern sky. At least, Harry thought she was, since her head was turned in that direction. Since the hood covered her face completely, though, she could have been looking at something else and he would never have known.

Harry watched her thoughtfully. The revelation of her true identity at the spring equinox meeting hadn't caused the stir Harry thought it would. Most parents seemed to have accepted that, since she had taught their children well so far, she would go on teaching them well. Or perhaps they were simply afraid to object to a witch who could summon dragons from New Zealand.

"Harry."

Harry cocked his head. He had heard Acies sound like that only once before, when she came to tell him about the third prophecy. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Can you hear the singing?"

Harry closed his eyes and listened, focusing his magic towards the sky. He supposed there was a frenzied symphony playing on the edge of consciousness, but that was not a surprise, with Walpurgis coming up in a few weeks, and the wild Dark's music circling closer to the earth as a consequence. For the first time, though, he made an effort to push his hearing beyond that, to take in some other kind of melody, if it existed. Perhaps it was audible only to ears that were stained with dragon.

No. Wait. He thought he could hear a song so joyous and savage that it cut into his ears like shards of glass. The only one he had ever heard to resemble it was the melody playing as he'd freed the Runespoors. Dark creatures, they'd been bound with a song of Light they couldn't undo, the music that the turning of the moon and the sun and the stars played. Harry remembered that song as soothing, though, not this cascade of sapphire notes that slipped out of his head the moment he heard them.

"Yes," he breathed.

"I do not know if I can help you during the Midsummer battle," Acies whispered, her voice the most choked Harry had ever heard it. "The songs come closer. The Light will sing on Midsummer. And the Dark will be singing beyond that, to counter its ancient enemy. Both of them will focus on Hogwarts, because there are two powerful wizards

here. And I—the human and dragon have equal weight in my mind now, since I summoned the Antipodean Opaleye.”

Harry caught his breath. “You said that if you came too near to the great music, then you feared you’d change,” he said. “That the dragon would take over, the Singer responding to the songs.”

Acies nodded. “I am sorry. I had hoped to summon a dragon to aid you in the battle, but now, I fear—” She shuddered and swayed and made a small, helpless sound, and Harry found that he pitied her, for the first time. She had always seemed so inhuman before that it was hard to pity her, to feel anything but sorrow and compassion for her as grand as she was.

“I understand,” said Harry. “If you summoned a dragon to aid me, that would tip the balance, and your own dragon would emerge.”

“It would,” said Acies softly. “And I am not ready to stop being human. Not yet.”

Harry gently touched her robe. He wasn’t sure if he’d made contact with her spine, though he thought he had. “Please don’t trouble yourself about it, Acies,” he said softly. “The help you’ve given me so far has been more than welcome. And I don’t want anyone to sacrifice themselves to my battle, my need.”

“Thank you,” Acies whispered without sound, and stood still as Harry took himself off the Tower and towards the Slytherin common room. Draco was probably awake by now, and muttering about how anyone normal would use the Easter holiday to sleep in, not go watching violent dawns from the tops of towers.

Harry was halfway back to the dungeons when he heard a low, vaguely familiar voice say from the hallway ahead, “Point Me Harry vates.”

Harry dropped into a crouch. He wasn’t sure how someone hostile could have got in past McGonagall’s reconstructed wards, but better safe than sorry—and she hadn’t finished the work completely, not yet. He spun smoothly around the corner, his hand already uplifted to

bring down scorching whips of magic if they were needed, or a Body-Bind if they weren't.

The person looking for him laughed and lowered his wand. "Good, Harry," he said with a brief nod. "Prepared, eh? Good, good. Constant vigilance!"

Harry blinked and dropped his hand. "Auror Moody? Is something wrong at the Ministry?" He couldn't imagine any other reason for Moody to be here. He wasn't the kind of person one would choose to send on peaceful or diplomatic missions.

"Something wrong at the Ministry?" Moody's face darkened like one of the clouds that had failed to show up in the sky this morning. "I'll say there is. Spineless cowardice, rampant corruption, use of Dark magic as if it were going out of fashion tomorrow." He shook his head. "Besides," he added, voice taking on a sly cadence, "your information's a little outdated, boy. You're calling me by a title that I don't have any more."

Harry stared at him. "You stopped being an Auror?" He supposed it wasn't much of a surprise. Moody had been retired when Mulciber captured him and used his hair to pose as the Defense teacher, and Moody might only have reentered the Ministry out of personal irritation. Since he'd been one of the original members of the Order of the Phoenix, maybe his disgust with Dumbledore had, in turn, overcome his irritation with Dark wizards. "Why?"

"Because of the Ministry," Moody grunted. "And a Minister who won't see what's in front of his face when curs bite people. And a better position waiting for me." He paused and fixed Harry with his normal eye; his magical one kept roving the corridor, looking, Harry supposed, for gaps and breaks in the stone, or traces of Dark magic. "If you'll have me, of course."

Harry blinked. "You—you came to join me." At least he managed to not make it a question.

Moody cackled. "I did," he said. "You're prepared, boy, but you could be better-prepared. I heard about a dueling club you had. It needs

teaching in techniques you wouldn't know, because you've never had Auror training. And, of course, there's the lovely little fact that Dark wizards surround you all the time. Your side needs a little of the Light."

Harry laughed despite himself. "Can you get along with those Dark wizards?" he asked, remembering then that Moody had been responsible for capturing many of the Death Eaters.

"I got along with their cowardly cousins every day in the Ministry."

Harry nodded, satisfied. "And you think your teaching can make the difference for the dueling club?" he asked.

"Put it this way, boy." When Moody grinned, his face did distinctly disturbing things. "I made Evan Rosier retreat three times. Ask him about the scar down the inside of his left arm some time when he's feeling chatty."

"Welcome, then." Harry held out his hand, and Moody clasped it.

"Good," he said, and looked thoughtfully at Harry's handless arm. "There are replacements for those, you know."

Not you, too. Snape mentioned his hand at least once a day, now. Harry supposed some nagging was a small price to put up with for having both his guardian back and a new, powerful fighter joining them, though.

"I can't do that right now," he explained, as they began to walk to breakfast. "Bellatrix Lestrange used a certain ritual I don't know to enchant the knife that cut my hand off..."

Rufus, for once, felt no better even when he'd had his morning tea.

Nursing the cup, he stared down at the paperwork in front of him. All he had to do was sign it, and that was the end of it. It would confirm the Wizengamot's decision to force all registered werewolves to spend the nights of the full moon in Tullianum. The moment he signed it, the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures would begin creating Portkeys that would take their

recipients straight to cells in Tullianum on the appointed nights. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement would make sure that the Portkeys got to their destinations.

Only on the appointed nights, of course. Rufus had provoked his first shouting match with Amelia Bones in three years by asking if she was sure that the Portkeys would work then and only then, and wouldn't accidentally trap the werewolves beforehand. The fact that she couldn't look him in the eye while she reassured him was really what made him feel sick to his stomach.

Why did I ever think that being Minister in a wartime situation was easy? The history he'd read certainly made it sound as though the Ministry in Grindelwald's time had an easier time of it. It did what needed to be done, cleanly and without pause, and if it made mistakes, well, that was natural, and if it used more force than was strictly necessary, well, everyone understood; it was wartime. Rufus had always thought he was made to come into power in a time like that. He understood necessity. He should be able to swallow anything that Amelia Bones and the other Heads of Departments handed him, so long as it wasn't idiocy that would lead only to someone else's personal advancement and wouldn't benefit the war.

Why am I balking now?

Someone rapped on the door of his office. Grateful to whoever it was for the interruption—Percy was attending Auror Training at the moment, and wasn't available to serve as one—Rufus pushed aside the paperwork and looked up. "Enter."

Auror Wilmot slid inside, his head cocked and a strong sense of agitation brewing in him. Well, Rufus couldn't blame him for that. Nearly everyone had been on edge since Elder Gillyflower got bitten.

"The reports you asked for, sir," he said, laying a pile of new paperwork gently on the edge of the desk. "Everyone involved in breaking up that illegal potions-brewing ring is done with theirs now."

"Good," said Rufus, with genuine relief, reaching over and flipping through the parchment. It was more of the same, and that made it

comforting, familiar. Every two years or so, someone thought he could brew potions illegal on British soil but legal in most other wizarding communities, and evade the “prudish” Ministry while he did it. Usually, the trouble came from France or Ireland, but this brewer had been Basque, and it had taken them quite a bit longer to catch him.

He paused as he caught sight of a list of ingredients on the first page. “Demiguise hair?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” said Wilmot. “Apparently he thought the time had come for Britain to get its first taste of Morning After Potion.”

Rufus snorted. The Morning After Potion erased all details of embarrassing sexual encounters from one’s memory. It also gave the drinkers chronic heart conditions after two uses, and frequently caused explosions when it was brewing. “More like thirtieth,” he said absently, but went on staring at the list of ingredients. Demiguise hair, fairy wings, powdered bicorn horn...why do these sound familiar?

And then he knew, of course. Rufus stood up, eyes fastened on the list of ingredients. Wilmot jumped to attention, one hand on his wand.

“Sir?”

Rufus took a deep breath and studied the Auror carefully. He thought he could trust Wilmot to keep this quiet. He was, of course, part of the vast network of favors that guided the Ministry and which Rufus did his best to ignore, but he had no ties that would make blurting this secret out an irresistible temptation. At least, Rufus thought he didn’t. There did seem to be some people with blackmail material on Wilmot that he’d never been able to discover.

“Edmund,” he said, “I want you to move the confiscated Potions ingredients from the Auror offices to mine. Can you do that?” He could hardly stride into the Auror offices to do it himself.

Wilmot blinked. “Of course, sir.” He hesitated, then added, “May I ask why?”

Rufus nodded firmly. "I have a cousin who—would be interested in them." And he did, although he hadn't seen Robert in years. Robert was an accomplished Potions brewer, always whining about the scut work he had to do to keep himself from starving. Rufus thought the problem with his cousin was more that Robert couldn't resist a challenge, and would brew complicated but inexpensive potions just to see if he could. "He's been wanting to try his hand at making—a potion that uses these ingredients for years now. And I thought, well, there's no reason that he couldn't try with these, since we know they weren't stolen, just bought on the black market."

Wilmot stared at him some more. Rufus saw the connection spring into place in his mind. Wilmot wasn't blind, or stupid. He knew that the Wolfsbane Potion used all those ingredients.

"And what would happen to the potion once he made it?" Wilmot's voice was gently strangled.

"Well, he's mostly interested in making the potion," said Rufus thoughtfully. "That's more important to him than credit, or even money. I was thinking that, once he's done with it, it could be moved away from his house and distributed to people who might need it. Quietly, of course. After all, it wouldn't do for the Minister to be seen handing it out in the street."

He nodded as he thought about it. Yes, it was the right thing to do. The main problem was that any public move he made right now could be criticized wildly, by either the British people or the werewolves—who were his people, too, at least if he followed Harry's line of reasoning. But giving Wolfsbane away without linking himself directly to its production could make a difference to the temperament of some werewolves and spare him from that criticism. He could at least act privately, if not publicly.

He scrutinized Wilmot now, wondering if he would approve or disapprove of the plan. If his disapproval was plain, then Rufus would arrange matters differently. There were other people who would help, though none as unobtrusive; Tonks, for example, was more often considered the Minister's "pet" because she guarded him so often.

But Wilmot stared at him as if he were seeing a vision of the Light. Rufus raised his eyebrows. Well. That is different from the way other people have looked at me today. He forced away the pang that came at the thought of accepting Alastor Moody's resignation, and stared back.

"Will you do this for me, Edmund?" he asked.

Wilmot gave himself a little shake. "Of course, Minister," he said. "I will do it gladly." He stared for a moment more, and then added, "You're a different man than I thought you were, sir."

He opened the door and departed, leaving Rufus to sit behind his desk and feel a little better than before. He hesitated a long moment, and then scrawled a denial on the proposal to create Portkeys for the purpose of transporting werewolves.

It would mean another shouting match with Amelia. At the moment, he felt more than equal to that.

Remus closed his eyes, and breathed.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd breathed like this—no, wait, of course he could. It had been the last time he was near the presence of so many other werewolves, which would have been the summer four years ago. The summer three years ago had been spent testing the Wolfsbane and preparing to teach at Hogwarts, the summer two years ago had been spent at Lux Aeterna grieving for Sirius and trying to learn James, and last summer had been spent at the Sanctuary. And now the summer was almost come around again, and it looked like he'd be spending it—

Here.

Remus set his trunk to drift behind him and waited patiently. He stood in the rain, on a street that looked as if it had dirt rubbed into the sides of the buildings, but he didn't care. At least there were no cars here, and no Muggles around. Muggles tended to move, slowly but surely, out of areas that werewolves inhabited. They might not even realize they were doing it, they certainly wouldn't admit to what the prickling fear running up and down their spines meant, and they often

actually believed that their kind still inhabited these particular areas of London.

But they were gone from this one. It had been the home of Loki's pack for over twenty years, and the wolf was deep in every wall, every doorway, every stone. Something in the back of Muggles' brains knew what that meant, even if they didn't admit it aloud, and kept them away.

"Remus."

Remus turned with a faint smile to nod at the girl who'd found him. She'd been born Muggle, but had actually been bitten before she was a year old and managed to survive. She didn't pay any attention to his floating trunk, instead eying him minutely, sniffing for any trace of tracking spells or other magic that could hurt the pack. Remus waited until she looked up at his face, made a brief, flickering moment of eye contact that was enough to welcome and not enough to challenge him, and then said, "Hullo, Camellia."

"Hullo yourself," Camellia retorted, shaking her long dark hair as she glanced from side to side. "Loki didn't expect to see you here for another few months at least. Thought the blind wizards would wait that long before throwing you out."

"Well. They didn't." And Remus could understand why, even though he thought they were doing the wrong thing, and had even tried to explain that. Minerva had told him that she didn't trust him near children when he considered werewolves and their political agenda more important. Remus knew the truth, though. A werewolf learned early on to smell fear, and she was afraid. She feared he might bite them, and especially, that he might bite Harry, that part of Loki's plan might be having the vates become a werewolf and be more bound to help them than ever.

That was a groundless fear, but Remus couldn't explain why it was groundless without explaining pack magic, and the existence of that would startle and unnerve Minerva far more than the existence of werewolves wanting equal rights to wizards.

“Come along,” Camellia told him, and started loping up the street, her baggy clothes swaying around her. “The others are waiting.”

Remus followed her, continuing to breathe deeply, deeply, in. The air wasn't scented with musk, at least not in most places; after all, it was nearly five nights since the full moon, and the reek of transformed werewolves faded quickly into the rain. But it was wild, haunted with a different kind of magic, haunted with a companionship that ranged beyond bodies. The area around him was, mostly, a comfortless gray that Remus might have found depressing just a year ago. As it was, he found it cheering now, the kind of color a werewolf would see when transformed.

All of this might have been different, he thought absently, as Camellia guided him up a set of steps and into the hollowed-out space of what seemed like an abandoned house on the outside, but hummed with light and warmth and magic on the inside, if he hadn't written a letter to Loki while he was at the Sanctuary. The Seers had encouraged him to do so, as part of coming to terms with his past. Remus really hadn't expected an answer.

But Loki had given him one, a long letter full of news about the London packs and how the Ministry was pushing them to death. And Remus had written back, and Loki had written him, and gradually, Remus's startlement had melted. He'd been wary of Loki as recently as November, when the other werewolf's plans were still strange and new to him. But months of reasonable explanations had convinced him that Loki was right. Remus only wished that he'd been able to convince Harry, and that they hadn't had to part ways over this.

He stepped into the house, which was enormous, both on the ground floor and in the number of stories it had. Men and women sprawled on the rugs looked up at him lazily; Camellia's entrance had already warned them someone was coming. Remus felt his face soften further at the sight of people casually entwined, necks resting on each other's, bodies draped over each other's backs. Two children were wrestling in a corner of the room, but they were new members of the pack and probably still establishing their place in the hierarchy. Remus remembered the first time he'd entered this room when he was fourteen, the shock he'd had at meeting pair after pair of amber

eyes. Now, the last of the tension he'd been harboring since Hogwarts dissipated completely.

"Remus."

Remus turned and dropped to the floor as Loki moved towards him from a corner of the room. Loki stopped in front of him and bent, too, rubbing his cheek against Remus's with a soft yip of greeting. Remus looked up at him. Loki looked the same as he ever did: white-blond hair to rival a Malfoy's, amber eyes, a seamed and laughing face. His mate, who called herself Gudrun, peered over his shoulder, and then snorted.

"What's Remus doing down there, Loki?" She punched her mate hard enough to stagger him. "Let him stand up, for Merlin's sake."

Loki moved back with a slight chuckle, and Remus gratefully stood. "Sorry," Loki murmured. "I get lost in remembering, sometimes, when I look into someone's eyes."

Remus nodded, understanding completely. The connection Loki had with other werewolves as a pack leader ran more deeply than theirs with him, allowing him to see into their minds and be enveloped in their magical auras. He did tend to be distracted when he didn't have to be sharp-eyed about a plan or an upcoming hunt.

"I have information for you," Remus told him.

"I'll fetch tea," said Gudrun, and moved away to do that. Around them, the room relaxed and went back to its quiet companionship. Loki put his hand on Remus's shoulder.

"The vates?" he asked.

"Refusing to understand," said Remus sadly. Loki hadn't assigned him to convince Harry, but he'd wanted to, wanted to make him understand that with their packs dying, they had no alternative but this. "At least, so far."

Loki cocked his head, eyes blazing wildly bright, making him look fierce and dangerous, though he continued to stand still. “Well,” he murmured, “I have an idea for something that might convince him.”

Eagerly, Remus followed him to a corner to make his report, to hear his plan, and to breathe in the contained power that hung around Loki like a second scent. Being around the other werewolf, more than in this place or with the pack itself, made him feel at home.

Someone was testing her wards again. And by the image that the surveillance spells on the outside of her house were sending to her mind, Henrietta Bulstrode knew exactly who it was.

She considered her options, tapping her fingers against the book she’d been reading. She could stay here and ignore the testing, and eventually he’d leave. He’d tried again and again in the past few days, and all Henrietta had to do was tighten her magic—with ordinary slowness, as if she were merely doing maintenance, affecting never to notice him—and ignore it. If she did go out, then she could only use Dark Arts to defend herself, as per the vows she’d given to Harry.

Of course, with this one, there was really never any doubt that she’d need to defend herself. And reading up on Transfiguration, repairing the holes that still gaped in her education, had little to recommend it next to such a—challenge.

Henrietta stood and Apparated along the lines of the wards, appearing just outside them. No crack sounded when she did that, and so her visitor, standing on the rainswept grass as he incanted spell after spell at her defenses, remained unaware of her presence for a moment.

Only a moment, though. Then Evan Rosier turned around and gave her a fierce, feral smile. Henrietta gave back a faint shudder, one that didn’t contain fear. This is a wonderful way to get the blood moving.

“I suppose Harry warned you?” Rosier asked, swinging his wand in a lazy arc. “About needing to watch your back?”

“Of course he did,” said Henrietta. “I’m surprised at you, though, Evan, seeking me out like this. I thought you’d be subtler than that.”

There was no warning. One moment, Rosier stood there, relaxed as a great hunting cat in the sun, smiling at her; the next, he was swinging his wand forward, and a pain curse was erupting from the end of it, a vicious red line that would cause incurable burns if it touched her.

Henrietta arched an eyebrow as she reached out to her home. I thought he would have more imagination than that, as well as more subtlety.

She'd constructed a rune circle that ran all the way around her home, outside the wards. The runes were buried innocently in the ground, scribed on turned-over rocks or the undersides of leaves. Henrietta really wasn't surprised Rosier had missed them. He could have watched her build the whole thing, and it would only have seemed as if she were doing a particularly enthusiastic bout of gardening.

The circle came to life, and lines of light, made of images of the transcribed runes, rose from all sides of it. They collided with the red curse Rosier had chosen and turned it into a flight of diamond dust and purple butterflies. Henrietta admitted the butterflies for a moment, then turned to smile at Rosier.

"Do you remember them, Evan?" she asked, deliberately making her voice breathy. "How prettily they fluttered around us as we fucked?"

His eyes darkened. Henrietta watched him, and smiled, and smiled. She still remembered the earth under her elbows as she fucked him, all against his will, knowing he could kill her at any moment if her spells faltered and not caring. He hadn't wanted to fuck her, and he hadn't wanted to hear the extra spells she whispered as she rode him, not because she had to but just because she could. She'd raped him in the midst of a flight of purple butterflies.

His smile was gone, just as it had been that evening. He wasn't used to other people getting the better of him. He was speaking another Dark Arts curse now, probably not realizing that the rune circle would defeat anything he could dream up, even his "special" spells, and so

he didn't make any move to counter Henrietta's silent *Abscindo vestitus*.

His robes and trousers parted neatly around the waist, and tumbled down around his ankles. Henrietta leaned nearer, and laughed quietly to see the purple scar on the inside of his thigh. "Still carrying my love bite, Evan? I never realized you cared so much."

He struck then, and struck and struck, gone into the madness that always lurked behind his smile. Henrietta bounced curse after curse. His creativity was impressive, but they meant little against her rune circle, which was brute strength crushing every one of those "creative" spells. He screamed at her, too, without words, and Henrietta didn't let that move her.

He vanished at last. Henrietta Apparated back inside her house and returned to reading about Transfiguration.

She needed to know as much about it as she could, since she intended to apply for the post of Transfiguration Professor at Hogwarts next year. She would have applied for Defense Against the Dark Arts if she thought she would be accepted, but she doubted McGonagall would let her teach that, even if Lestrage was gone by then. The Transfiguration post, however, was effectively empty as the Headmistress struggled to cover it from her new office. This was the best way for Henrietta to be close so that she could protect Harry.

"I think this will do," said Harry, oblivious to how loud he sounded with the Silencing spell protecting his ears from the mysterious creature's song.

Draco winced from the volume, but had to admit Harry was right. They'd found a room on the second floor of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place that would be perfect for Draco to carve his rune circle in: a wooden floor, no pests to eat up or smudge his careful work, and traces of old preservation spells that came to life when they felt the new ones being cast and would add an extra layer of protection to the circle. Draco knelt down and began to carve the first rune, one of binding.

Harry glanced aside from him, up the stairs towards the door where Narcissa had told Draco the creature was trapped. Draco kept an eye on him, even though his mother was also here, gathering up artifacts from downstairs that might be useful, or might be nuisances if they were left in the house, and Pettigrew was standing guard by the door upstairs. Harry wouldn't really be able to let the beast out.

Except that, of course, he still wanted to. And if he decided he should, then none of the three of them were going to be able to stop him.

Draco forced the thoughts out of his mind with a sigh, and made himself concentrate on the runes. Mother had assured him that the creature's song was a subtle compulsion, but not irresistible, and Draco didn't have to worry about it anyway, since it was much more interested in Harry and the meal of his magic. His part was getting all the runes exactly right.

And, of course, sneaking one of the Black artifacts out of the house without Harry noticing in time for the Walpurgis Night ritual.

Really. Don't think about that. Carve.

Draco turned his mind into concentrated ice, and did that. The runes took shape under his knife, not twisted this time; he had practiced the ones that had gone wrong in the Room of Requirement until he could have done them standing on his head with the carving knife in his teeth. They had to be perfect, since they were part of the plan that Harry had created to trap Voldemort on Midsummer Day, and they were going to be.

How mad is this plan?

Draco forced that thought away, too, in case it disturbed his calculated serenity, and went right on cutting. Harry sat by his side the entire time, now and then swaying and casting a glance upstairs. Draco touched his arm each time, and each time Harry turned obediently back and paid attention to the circle, though since he hadn't taken Ancient Runes it didn't mean much to him.

Finally, after more than two hours of cutting and checking and double-checking, it was done. Draco sat back on his heels and looked at Harry. "What do you think?" he mouthed, in an exaggerated fashion, so that Harry could read his lips.

"It looks unbroken," said Harry, and smiled at him. Draco set himself against the force of that smile; he thought he didn't flush, only nodded and smiled back, but Harry was turning away in any case, and probably wouldn't have seen it. "I'm sure it'll work, Draco. I have faith in you."

Draco's nerve broke. He reached out and caught Harry's left wrist, turning him back. Harry arched his brows, and Draco mouthed another question. "Are you sure we need to do this?"

Harry's face softened, and he leaned nearer to touch Draco's cheek and then kiss him gently on the side of the mouth. "Yes," he said. "I know it seems complicated as hell, but it's the only way to absolutely defang him and make sure he isn't a danger for a time. I don't think we can kill him yet, but the wizarding world has other problems to deal with right now. We don't need Voldemort over the summer."

Draco felt a surge of warmth in his stomach. Though of course Harry was doing this to free the northern goblins and to defeat the Dark Lord and to defend the school and for all the other right and honorable reasons, there was still a shadow of a suspicion in there that Harry had done it to give them both a quieter summer.

And Draco liked that. He liked that rather a lot.

A movement near the door of the room caught his eye, and he looked up to see his mother standing there with a silver object in her hand. She tipped it enough so that he could see what it was, and Draco felt the warmth turn into delight. It was perfect for his courting ritual with Harry. He nodded.

Harry turned to see what he was looking at, but by then, Narcissa had vanished.

"What was that all about?" Harry asked suspiciously.

Draco shook his head innocently, smiling when Harry's glare sharpened. Then he held up both of his hands, fingers spread wide, in a signal that Harry understood perfectly well. He was the one to look away then, while Draco grinned.

Ten days until Walpurgis.

Minerva sat back, sipped at her tea for a moment, and let the peace warm its way into her bones.

From the top of the North Tower to the tunnels under Hogwarts that the Founders knew and had told her about, the school was hers. It hummed with the wards she'd woven slowly over the last two weeks of the Easter holiday, defensive spells based in strength and courage and stubbornness and determination not to be like Albus. These wards would not falter if she did. They were bound to the permanent magic of the school, much as the Room of Requirement and the Founders' anchor-stones were. They wouldn't let her spy on her students' and professors' movements even if she wanted to. They were focused on defense, on identifying hostile presences and caging them, on making sure that any student injured in an accident or a fight got immediate transportation to the hospital wing, on minimalizing the danger of magic as much as possible while increasing the wonder of it.

"Pleased with yourself?"

Minerva opened one eye. Godric stood in a corner of the office, obviously having arranged himself so he wouldn't float through the stone floor, a bright grin on his face as he watched her.

"I am." Minerva rubbed her face with one hand and yawned. "The children come back tomorrow, and they'll be safer and more secure than they've been in—decades, probably." She didn't know if Albus really had begun altering the wards the moment he became Headmaster, but it wouldn't surprise her.

"You should be proud," said Godric softly. "You are a credit to the House of Gryffindor, Minerva."

She opened both eyes at that, and frowned at him. "Is there something wrong, Godric?"

He smiled and glanced to the side. Minerva watched as a shape slowly coalesced there: brown-eyed, brown-haired, wearing a shapeless robe, and nervous as Neville Longbottom in a Potions practical. It was Helga Hufflepuff, come to meet her face-to-face at last.

"Only that you've impressed Helga," said Godric. "She distrusted Albus before the rest of us, and nearly wrenched herself free from the school rather than serve an unworthy Headmaster. But you've convinced her that not all members of my House are proud idiots unable to see beyond the ends of their lives. Congratulations." He bowed to both of them. "I'll leave you two to get acquainted."

He vanished. Helga and Minerva watched each other warily for a moment, until Minerva cleared her throat.

"I was wondering if you could come up with certain defenses for the Forbidden Forest," she said. "We have an enemy skilled in Herbology now, but the trees are full of ancient magic of their own that makes establishing wards around them difficult."

"I know," said Helga, in a low, lovely voice, and floated towards her desk. "I have some ideas."

Minerva relaxed again, and picked up her teacup. I may actually be worthy of not only Gryffindor's legacy, but the Headmistress position after all. Here is to hope.

Chapter Eighty: Calling Up the Wild Magic

Harry rubbed irritably at his ears. It was all very well for the wild Dark to run around singing, but when he started hearing the song even in the middle of Arithmancy, then something had to be done.

“Mr.—Harry? Are you all right?”

Harry managed to give Vector a pained smile. “Yes, Professor.” He bent over his work again, trying to disregard the glances that other students were giving him. He could hardly blame them. After all, if something was wrong with him, then Voldemort might be about to attack the school, or an immense beast might appear out of nowhere and crash into it. Harry wondered how many of them considered him a ward, blaring before a danger actually reached them to give them time to hide.

A flare of irritation surged through him, and a white dove appeared out of nowhere above his head and fled towards the window, wings clattering. When it couldn't find exit there, it wheeled around and then flew up towards the ceiling. It perched there and began to coo. Professor Vector stared at it, and then at him. The other students said nothing, their hunched shoulders more eloquent than their mouths could be.

“Harry,” said the professor at last, voice clipped. “Do attempt to control yourself.”

“I will,” Harry whispered, feeling his ears burn. “It's Walpurgis.” He turned a sharp glance on Draco when he realized that Draco was snickering behind his hand and not even trying to hide it. Draco gave him an innocent look, shaking his head.

“A dove, Harry?” he whispered. “And you can't do anything better than that, then? At least a dragon wouldn't raise doubts about what sweet and innocent dreams you have at night.”

“Shut it,” Harry muttered, and went back to his calculations. The dove uttered a few more experimental coos before tucking its head under

its wing and going to sleep. Harry reminded himself to capture it after Arithmancy so he could release it outside.

His magic was creating birds and scents and miniature lightning storms any time he experienced a strong emotion, and it was still five days until Walpurgis. Harry dreaded to see what he would be doing by the time the last day of April actually arrived.

Draco tapped the book with his finger and leaned over it one last time. The words it contained were practically etched with acid into his brain by now, but there might be one thing he'd forgotten, one requirement of the ritual that he'd let lapse from his mind because it wasn't as interesting as the others. So he read it again.

The formal courting ritual takes three years in total. It is best to begin on Walpurgis Night, for then not only is the wild magic close to the earth to see the lovers and give them its blessing, but emotions otherwise buried may also rise. Walpurgis calls to the magic in the blood and bone, and wizards and witches sing back to the sky. Even Light wizards are restless on that night, sensing the ancient communion that pertained to all before some turned their back on the spaces between the stars and proclaimed they would follow only the starlight.

Draco raised his eyebrows, as he always did. That was the only point on which he really distrusted this book. It claimed that all wizards had once been Dark and the Light came later. Draco didn't think so. Some people had always been afraid, which meant there must always have been Light wizards in the world. He rolled over on an elbow and continued reading, unafraid that Harry would find him. Harry was off brewing potions with Snape. They did that more often now that they'd finally settled the stupid argument between them.

On such a night, those who do not know each other, the newly introduced lover and beloved, may be more amenable to the marriage or joining than otherwise. Their parents should introduce them, and then leave them alone. A coupling on this night between new lovers would not be wise, but those performing the ritual will not wish to bed each other in any case.

“That’s what you think,” Draco muttered. Of course, the ritual had been intended to match partners in arranged marriages and joinings, initially. It made sense that two people suddenly forced together wouldn’t be that interested in leaping into bed.

The purpose of all the smaller rituals that are part of this courting—save the thirteenth and last, which is the actual marriage or joining, and should take place on the Walpurgis three years after the beginning of the ritual—is to create intense experiences that the partners may share together. This is the true purpose of the absence of parents, siblings, and other traditional guards for a young man or woman of marriageable age. If they participate, the ritual will go subtly awry, and attempt to include them in the partnering. Save in the case of Flora, Pomona, and Tertius Guile, such joinings are not usually successful.

Draco gave a shiver of distaste at the thought of getting Connor pulled into the ritual, or anyone else who might follow them in curiosity to see what was happening. He would definitely make sure that he and Harry were alone before he started the ritual after the dancing.

The lover will need to present his beloved with a gift important to the lover’s maternal bloodline, symbolizing the birth of a new and momentous link. This gift must be secured while the beloved is nearby, but not seen beforehand. The beloved will need to accept it and speak the required words that allow the ritual to proceed, “In blood we begin this marriage/joining, on earth, in the sight of the dark spaces between the stars.”

Draco nodded. He’d memorized the words, and he could easily prompt Harry, who knew nothing about them yet—Harry had not demanded to know any details of the rituals—to say them.

The rest of the details of the ritual were as he remembered them. Draco gently put the book aside and lay back on the bed, fighting the urge to laugh giddily and wrap his arms around himself.

Three days until Walpurgis Night.

Harry sat straight up in bed, and blinked at nothing. The dream tattered through his head, not having the clarity of a vision come from Voldemort, but not fading the way that most of his ordinary dreams did, either.

In it, a shining black wyvern with silver wings had threatened him. It had stalked him through a dark green clearing, and tried to sting him several times with its scorpion tail. Harry had avoided each strike, and said the most nonsensical things to the wyvern in turn, scolding it, as if it were a pet that he needed to hold back from hurting either him or itself. The wyvern had shrieked like a kettle in irritation each time he did so.

“Well, that was different,” he said aloud.

“What was different?” Draco’s voice just outside his bed-curtains made him start, Argutus blink and hiss sleepily, and the Many snake lift her head from the blankets, ready to bite anyone who threatened Harry. Harry swallowed and told himself that startlement was not the same thing as fear.

“A dream that was, for once, just an ordinary dream,” he said, keeping his voice low, and opened the curtains. Draco stood there with his wand in his hand and Lumos glinting on the end of it. Harry rolled his eyes. “Come in, for Merlin’s sake, before we wake Blaise up.” Blaise had tended to look particularly martyred in the past week whenever he was deprived of sleep, though that could be because he and Ginny were still having an ongoing argument, and he lay awake at night thinking up retorts.

Draco crawled into the bed with him, and let the curtains fall closed. He reached out to stroke Argutus’s head, and Argutus hissed happily. “His hands are always warmer than yours,” he told Harry.

“That’s nice,” said Harry absently, and turned back to Draco. “What’s the matter? Did you have a nightmare?”

Draco gave him an odd look. “No. Why do you ask?”

“Because you were standing outside the curtains as if you were waiting for me to wake up,” said Harry. “A bad dream might cause that, but I don’t know what else.”

“Because I heard you talking in your sleep, of course.” Draco abruptly grinned and leaned closer to him. “I thought I’d come over here and make sure that you weren’t moaning anyone else’s name but mine.”

Harry felt his cheeks flush, and knew from Draco’s satisfied look that he’d seen it. He didn’t really understand that part of their relationship yet, Harry had to admit. If anyone had asked him, he would have said that Draco would want a partner who could keep up with him in witty flirtation, rather than, as Harry did, only achieving it in certain moments. He had done it at the alliance meeting, but only by taking Draco utterly off-guard with the public announcement of their courting ritual. Instead, Draco seemed to enjoy provoking any reaction he could out of Harry, whether that was stuttering or flushing or a poleaxed stare.

Well, if I am not equal to him in that, I can try to be. And perhaps he’s not as obsessed with it as I think he is. He has never said anything to indicate that he wishes I’d be wittier.

“No, no one’s name but yours,” said Harry, and lowered his voice as he said it, to see what would happen. Draco blinked at him, his expression bearing a distinct hint of That’s not fair. Harry cocked his head at him and leaned in closer. “Or were you making sure of that, instead? I’ve seen you reading all those books lately that you’ve been refusing to show me the titles of. Have you been studying incantations for certain kinds of dreams, Draco?”

“Of course not!” Draco exclaimed, as if he thought the accusation was serious. “Those are books about the ritual, Harry, and I just want to make sure that I’m doing everything right and that I’m surprising you. That’s all.”

“Hmmm.” Harry told his impending panic, present mostly because he was sure to mess this up, to bummer off. “And what kinds of surprises do you have for me, Draco?” He let his eyes flicker down Draco’s body, and abruptly Draco was the one looking poleaxed. Harry

grinned at him, unable to maintain the front for much longer. I can see why he likes doing this. This is fun—when it goes right.

“Um,” said Draco, and looked at him some more. Then he said, “I think I’ll go back to bed now,” and opened the curtains, though he looked as if he wished that Harry would invite him to stay.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Harry agreed solemnly. “After all, we wouldn’t want to wake Blaise up with all our nocturnal activities.”

Draco blinked. Then he said, “Flirting isn’t a necessary part of the ritual, Harry.”

Does he really think that I’d only do this because of that? Yes, he does, from that expression. Harry sighed and reached out, letting his hand glance along the side of Draco’s cheek. “I know it’s not,” he whispered. “I’m doing this because I want to, Draco, and for no other reason.” He raised his eyebrows. “Do you really think that you could force me into doing something I didn’t want?”

“No, but your training—“

“My training has nothing to do with this part of it,” said Harry. “Go to sleep, Draco. After all, you’ll need all your strength tomorrow night.”

He watched in satisfaction as that made Draco stumble a little on his way back to the bed. Well it might. This was the first time Harry had ever tried to flirt seriously, and that he was choosing to do it the night before the courting ritual began would make it all the more significant to Draco.

Well, good. I want it to be significant.

Harry slid back under the blankets and closed his eyes, to the delight of both Argutus and the Many snake.

One day until Walpurgis.

Harry tensed when he received the Daily Prophet the next morning. The headline on the front page concerned “shock tactics” that a werewolf group had used to try and force people to pay attention to

them: vandalism on several shops in Diagon Alley, and enchantment of objects in each shop to chant slogans supporting werewolves' rights. The story contained a quote from "former Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge" on how awful the vandalism was, though, from the descriptions that Skeeter had chosen, Harry thought it sounded minor.

But that's not an excuse, is it? Harry thought, as he handed the paper over to Draco and began eating his sausages, with Argutus's earnest help. No, it's not. Biting people might be their worst tactic, but they wouldn't limit themselves to causing chaos and damage on the full moon nights alone. Of course not.

What they're doing is dangerous and irresponsible. How long before it escalates from night raids and vandalism and minor spells to an all-out curse war? The werewolves might not even start that, Aurors might, but it would still result in dead people. And the moon is full again in two days.

He started to push his plate away from him, but Argutus was hanging off his shoulder, a bond that connected him to the plate, and objected with hisses loud enough to make several students look over at the Slytherin table. Harry flushed and let the Omen snake take a few bites from his fingers. Argutus immediately started crooning that he was the best friend a snake could have, and wrapped his tail securely around Harry's throat while he feasted. He'd grown long enough now that he flowed over Harry's shoulders like some kind of mirrored drapery, and though he still preferred to ride with some part of himself touching Harry's left wrist, he couldn't expect a loop of his tail around it to support his weight any longer.

"What's the matter?"

Harry, surprised, turned his head. He would have expected Draco, if anyone, to comment on his reaction to the article, but it was Pansy, her head cocked to watch him. Harry couldn't see her face in the confines of her hood. That was all right. He'd finally got used to Pansy as a black-wrapped presence, he thought, with the robes billowing and drifting around her as the dead played with them, and

the scent of rotting flesh growing stronger every day. And of course she could talk aloud to him now, since today was Walpurgis.

"I don't know what the best course is, with the werewolves," he whispered to her. "If I knew who they were, I might be able to stop them, but I only have the name of a leader, not a location or a description."

Pansy paused for so long that Harry wondered if she'd retreated into communion with the dead, or found what he said boring. Then she said, "Is it your responsibility to stop this, Harry? They've chosen their fate."

"I would like to stop it, at least," said Harry. "They're dragging innocents into a second war, and they're dividing the attention of the Aurors and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, which should be focused on stopping the Death Eaters as much as possible. Add to that the fact that they only got so bold in the first place because I made that oath to help them, and, yes. I think at least part of it is my responsibility."

Pansy inclined her head. "And what do you think their ultimate plan is?"

Harry shook his head. "I have no idea whatsoever. Remus told me what they want and the general outline of what they've decided on, but not the details of how they plan to achieve it."

"Do you think you'd know the werewolves who did this to Diagon Alley, to look at them?"

"Not unless I could use Veritaserum," said Harry.

"Then stop fretting," Pansy ordered him softly. "No one else expects you to stop this, Harry. They'll look to the Minister and Madam Bones and blame them. You should enjoy Walpurgis. The wild Dark and the dead both wish you well, you know, and your courting begins tonight."

Harry blinked at her. "The wild Dark wishes me well?" he asked stupidly. "How do you know that?"

He had the impression that Pansy smiled, though only the tilt of her head said so. It was becoming hard to remember how her gestures had looked without the robes, he thought, and that idea pierced him with a pang of sadness. “I know because it’s decided to talk to the dead this year, to ruffle them like wind blowing through the leaves of the trees, and the dead pass that restlessness on to me, Harry.”

“But I fought it at Midwinter,” said Harry. He had expected to have to spend Walpurgis Night with an eye on the heavens, waiting for an irritated black lightning bolt to come down at him.

“And that was Midwinter,” Pansy whispered. “Harry, honestly, do you think the wild Dark is consistent? It’s both like a great, spoiled child, and like the magnificence the Light showed on Midwinter, and right now it’s decided to be magnificent. And it approves of you, even. It likes the way that you stood up to it. This is the time of year when it’s happiest, and it wants you to be happy, too.”

“All—right,” said Harry slowly, trying to get used to the idea.

Someone claimed his hand, and he turned to see Draco smiling at him.

“You deserve to be happy, Harry,” he said fiercely, “and to think about something other than the fate of the world for one day. Now eat your breakfast, and then I have something planned for us.”

Harry raised his eyebrow, and started on his eggs, since Draco was watching, and Argutus had finished the sausages. Meanwhile, Draco kept up such a flow of chatter that Harry lost the specifics of the werewolves’ story under it.

He had his doubts about how good an idea this was, though. The last time he had stepped back from the world and absorbed himself in his own happiness, after his parents’ trial, Bellatrix Lestrange had taken over Durmstrang.

Harry did not expect that Draco’s surprise would involve skipping Defense Against the Dark Arts. Draco firmly took his hand when Harry turned towards Acies’s classroom, though, and steered him up

another corridor instead. Harry stumbled, and looked at Draco with a frown.

“Don’t you have History of Magic now?” he whispered.

Draco snorted, never looking away from the corridor he’d been dragging Harry up, his eyes intently studying the stones ahead of him, as if he intended to take Harry to a place inside the walls. “As if Binns is going to notice that I’m gone, Harry.”

Harry shook his head. “Well, Professor Lestrangle will definitely notice that I’m missing,” he whispered.

“Why are you whispering?” Draco lifted his eyebrows at him. “No one else is here. I’ve cast an aversion charm on the hallway. Ah!” He reached out and flicked his wand against the stones, and the wall softly rumbled and slid aside to reveal a small room Harry couldn’t remember seeing before, even on the Marauder’s Map.

The room was—ordinary, a bare stone box with four walls, and yet not ordinary. Harry cocked his head uneasily in several directions, trying to identify the source of the magic. It circled the chamber like the patrolling current of power in Woodhouse, but this was not a single, smooth, uninterrupted flow. Instead, it darted about like flashes of lightning, and evaded his eye. Harry thought it was place magic, though.

“Draco, what—“

“Shhh, Harry.” Draco hissed the words directly into his ear, as if he’d forgotten his own words about no intruders coming into the hallway. “Will you trust me for a moment? Let me show you what this is?”

“I’d trust you for a lifetime, Draco, and you know it,” said Harry. There went another flicker of magic, and he jumped. “I just want to know what this place is.”

“A room that my mother and father used when they were courting,” Draco said, and leaned his cheek against Harry’s. Harry realized in

startlement that his arms were linked around his waist, and that they stood much closer together than Harry usually felt comfortable with. The magic of the room had distracted him so much that he hadn't noticed. "Just watch. Please?"

The tone in the last word made Harry realize how long it had been since he and Draco had shared a moment like this. He was always worrying about something else, and surely Draco must find it wearing. He took a deep breath and forced himself to relax with a tiny nod.

The moment he did, the magic of the room seemed to notice them. Harry heard a deep sound, which might have been a purr or an amused chuckle, and then the air in front of them opened. Harry blinked as it bloomed with color, the tiny jabs of magic darting out from the walls to create an image of deep red, gold, silver, and green. The colors played around each other, refusing to assume solid form.

"I don't see how this is of use to courting couples," he muttered.

"Patience, Harry," Draco murmured back. "You'll see in a moment. And aren't they beautiful enough in and of themselves?"

Harry had to admit they were. Some of the colors were similar to ones he'd seen in the skies while he watched the Light's violent dawns, but they were all deeper, more jewel-toned. He let himself watch them and think of nothing else, and was surprised, when he next attended to it, by how relaxed his breathing had become. He leaned back against Draco, enjoying the warmth and pressure on his shoulders, neck, and spine.

The colors abruptly stopped brewing and scrambling, and then snapped into focus, forming an image so perfect that Harry caught his breath.

He saw himself—well, it had to be himself, because of the lightning bolt scar on his forehead and the messy black hair, even though he looked about ten years older—leaning back in a stone chair, his head against the supporting post of what looked to be a canopy made entirely of jade. The chair was molded to his body, as if it'd grown there. Older-Harry had his eyes closed, and Harry assumed he was

asleep. The ground around him was patterned stone, traced with glowing blue; it might have been marble, but had a glossy sheen that didn't resemble that rock.

Beyond the canopy post were plants that Harry didn't recognize, though the greenery and their enormous red flowers were lush enough to bring tears to his eyes. Something sang lazily through the bushes, song wandering and dipping as if it had all the time in the world to reach a conclusion, or didn't ever want to come to an end. And sunlight, sunlight, sunlight poured through the open sides of the—building? house?—he sat in, making the unfamiliar robes he wore shine like sunlight back. Harry could almost feel its warmth from here.

An older version of Draco paced into the image from the left, and paused, staring at the sleeping Older-Harry as if he were a vision. Harry blinked and stared in turn. He had always assumed that Draco would look like Lucius when he grew; they had hair and eyes the same shade, after all, and it made sense that Draco would shed some of his childish gestures over time. Instead, Draco looked more like Narcissa, as if grace were written in every fiber of his being. He himself wore deep red robes tinged with gold, and Harry wondered what they signified in that place, since he doubted Draco would wear Gryffindor colors unless he could be sure of no one associating them with Gryffindor.

Draco touched the sleeping Harry's shoulder and whispered something. Older-Harry must not have been asleep after all, because he reached his arms up, without opening his eyes, and wrapped them around Older-Draco's neck. He pulled him down and engaged him in a kiss that was neither gentle nor fierce, but had an air of permanence as great as the stone around them. Older-Draco closed his eyes and leaned into it, and around them the sunlight slanted and the hidden creature sang and sang and sang.

Harry closed his eyes to block any unfortunate tears, and opened them to find the colors had melted, swirling, back into the walls, and the room had returned to its lightning jabs of magic, apparently content to ignore them again.

“What—what was that?” Harry whispered.

Draco swallowed several times behind him, then cleared his throat, as if he had been too choked up to concentrate for a moment. “That was a possible future, Harry,” he said. “A future where we could be happy. The room sees them and shows them to the courting couples who come in—or to other people, too. I’ve heard generals used it to show possible outcomes of war strategies “

“But there’s no guarantee that’ll happen,” Harry said, and shut his eyes once more.

He felt the rustle of soft hair beside his cheek as Draco shook his head. “No. When my parents used it, they saw my father as Minister of Magic and my mother raising twin daughters.” Draco snorted. “You can see how that turned out.”

“Well, it’ll be our responsibility to make what we can of that joy real, then,” Harry said firmly, and turned, mimicking the gesture of the older version of himself as best as he could, wrapping his arms around Draco’s neck and kissing him.

Draco wasn’t prepared for the sudden shift in weight, and he stumbled, landing with his back against the wall. He didn’t hesitate to return the kiss after that, though, and while it wasn’t quite the kiss the older versions of themselves had shared—those two men had known each other for so much longer—it was good enough, Harry thought, to be going on with. He stepped away from Draco and opened his eyes.

Draco was panting slightly, shifting around as though he didn’t know where to put his hands. He locked his eyes on Harry’s.

“Thank you,” Harry said quietly.

“Any time you want to repeat that,” Draco responded, “feel absolutely free. No need to ask permission.”

Harry laughed softly, and the sound seemed to mingle in his mind with the sound of remembered song.

Draco had to admit, he was eager to see what a relatively normal Walpurgis Night looked like, without the accompaniment of Voldemort trying to chain the wild Dark and Harry having to fight him. He studied the faces of those students gathered around Millicent as she held aloft the dark green stone that would transport them to the largest collection of Dark magic in Britain that night, but could see nothing save a kind of calm excitement. Harry was the exception, of course, but Harry was always the exception. He had a listening look on his face. Now and then he stirred and glanced about. Draco asked him once what he was hearing, and Harry smiled absently at him.

“A horn,” he said.

Well, that doesn’t make sense. But Draco didn’t say so. Harry had relaxed for the rest of the day after their morning encounter with the courting room, and as the night drew closer and closer, Draco had been able to remember that tonight was the first of his joining to Harry. That contented him for all his boyfriend’s odd behavior.

Now, as the silver trceries on the dark green stone began to rise and spin around them like falling stars, Draco thought the only thing he had to regret was the absence of his parents. Lucius had refused flatly to attend Walpurgis, with the first cold tone in his voice that Draco had heard for months, and Narcissa had told him she thought it would be best if she didn’t, either. They would appear for the beginning of the ritual afterwards, when they would “introduce” Draco to Harry, but then leave again. The dancing and the other, wilder parts of the night were not for them.

But Professor Snape was coming with them—of course—and he watched with narrowed, suspicious eyes as the magic of the stone spun them through nothingness, and then deposited them. Draco looked around in curiosity. Last year, they had landed in a flower-covered field.

This time, they stood in the middle of a deep wood. Draco shivered a bit. The trees around them felt almost too alive, insisting on acknowledgment and recognition of their status as living beings. Their dark green leaves, the color of the stone Millicent still held, rustled

and whispered and dipped. Draco thought that normal until he realized there was no wind to toss them.

Then silver light struck through the trees, nearly blinding him. Draco raised his head and saw the moon soaring lazily overhead. It was not quite full yet, but even so, its light shouldn't have been that brilliant, Draco thought. This was more like the kind of moonlight Draco had imagined when his mother read bedtime stories to him, limning everything with a tracery more delicate and perfect than frost, turning the sky a deep blue in comparison to it.

Well, for that matter, is this wood a real wood? Draco had his doubts. For one thing, now that he was looking more closely at the trees, he could see that their bark was also dark green, though a paler color than their leaves. He didn't think any living trees looked like that.

And then he realized it didn't matter.

Joy had been stealing up on him for the past few minutes, and it overwhelmed him at the same moment as laughter broke from the other students around him. Even Snape loosed a chuckle, and then looked horrified at himself. Draco tilted his head up blindly, seeking the sky. He thought he knew what this was. He'd ridden some of the same immense emotions when Harry freed the wild Dark from Voldemort's control last year.

But now the wild Dark didn't have anything to worry about, and it poured down on them from the heavens with savage happiness.

Draco found himself trotting through the woods, and then running. He had no idea how he was managing to avoid the trees; he would never have run that fast at night normally, let alone in a strange place. But the moonlight and the trees spoke to him, and he ran, as if he were a werewolf. The air was thick with scents—not flowers, Draco thought, though he didn't know what they came from if so. Birds, maybe. Birds flashed past them overhead, and ringing notes came down, sharp answers to their laughter.

Draco wondered for a moment if he should get control of himself, and then wondered why. His father wasn't here to see him. The other

people around him were too involved in their own joy to sneer at him for his. Blaise was actually pirouetting in a circle and humming under his breath. Draco turned forward and let himself run, delighting in the way his body responded as if he'd been doing this all his life.

They arrived so suddenly in a glade that Draco stumbled, trying to get used to the suddenly clear ground. The glade was entirely empty, as if the trees had been razed from it long ago, except for two things. One was a stream of water—silver, of course—which seemed to flow from a tree root on one side of the clearing and vanish into one on the other. The other was a white deer, just jerking its head up with a snort from the stream.

Draco froze as the deer's golden eyes swept over him. Old, confused tales of white hinds and white stags jumbled in his head, and he didn't know how to breathe or what to believe. This deer had golden antlers, presumably marking it as a stag, but they were higher and heavier than Draco thought they should be, and curved inward, making the dark space between them into a gaping void.

The deer curved away from them in the next moment, and Draco found himself following, along with all the others.

It was impossible prey to chase, and impossible to leave off chasing, because the wild Dark drove them. Every time Draco thought he was about to stumble and fall, he would look up and catch a glimpse of a ghostly coat as the deer ran ahead, or golden antlers blazing in the night like meteors, and find a new surge of strength. He didn't know what would happen if he did catch the deer. He only knew that he wanted to run until that happened, that the creature seemed to have imprinted itself on his heart.

He had to slow at last, though, stumbling and gasping. Most of the others around him were doing the same thing; they used the breath they had left to laugh. Draco glanced around at them, and then frowned.

Harry was missing.

When he saw the white stag, Harry realized why he'd been hearing a hunting horn at odd moments all day. He was meant to follow it, and capture it, though what would happen after the capture he didn't know.

He ran on after the others had stopped, following that glimpse of white and gold. He could only compare the experience to the way he'd traveled the Forbidden Forest in third year, when Adalrico had just told him that Draco was in danger from what turned out to be a Black magical artifact. Roots parted around his feet like shadows. Trees slid past him, wavering. The ground itself seemed to support him and urge him back into the air. Harry felt wind cooling his brow when he started to sweat, easing the ache in his muscles.

He was in the presence of magic wilder and stranger than he had felt on any other Walpurgis Night, and he was not sure why. But his own magic answered it, coiling off his body, and the emotion he felt was not fear, but nearly pure happiness.

And determination. He was going to catch that deer.

He halted in another glade, as abruptly as he'd entered the one where the white stag had been drinking. The stag had stopped running and was waiting for him, head up, cocked to the side as if the golden antlers were no heavier than light.

Harry swallowed. He wondered if it would charge him, and attempt to kick him with those enormous hooves or bury those deadly antlers in his heart.

Instead, the stag came gravely forward and stopped in front of him. Harry stared into the golden eyes.

Strange, that they're golden. Shouldn't they be dark green or silver? Those are the colors that shine most often tonight.

The stag stamped a silver hoof, seeming irritated that Harry didn't understand. Then the golden eyes widened, and Harry found himself swept away within them, into a pinwheeling corridor of light and grace.

He understood in moments, then. The wild Dark did ordinarily favor the shades of dark green and silver on Walpurgis Night, but it was giving him gold and white tonight, as a gift, a thanks, an apology, a token, for facing it on Midwinter night.

Harry understood in that moment that the wild Dark held no grudges. It could not have done so; that was against its nature. It had struck back at Voldemort less for trying to hold it captive than because his trying to hold it captive had stung it, sent its power recoiling, and given it a good excuse. Or perhaps that was what it said to him now, and it had believed a different thing four months ago.

Harry put out his hand. He felt the stag's cool nose touch it, breathing a breath like hoarfrost over it, and found himself out of the golden eyes again, standing on his own two feet before it.

The deer breathed again, and trceries of dark green and silver coalesced on Harry's fingers and palm. He stared at them, dumbfounded. He recognized the insubstantial magic—flowers, birds, light—that Hawthorn had tossed into the air on the first Walpurgis Night he'd attended. She had tossed them up and invoked the wild Dark because she'd survived the Darkest magic that year, Fenrir Greyback's bite.

Harry supposed this meant that he'd survived the Darkest magic on this particular year. Midwinter, again.

Phoenix song stirred in him as if in response. Harry suppressed it. The song of a creature of Light wasn't appropriate right now.

He raised his eyes to the stag's face again. "Thank you," he said quietly.

The stag reared in a long sweep like a wave, and then turned and plunged into the woods. This time, Harry felt no urge to follow. The stag was beautiful precisely because it would never be caught, could not be taken alive. It could be killed, but then the hunter would find that the beauty had fled where he could not follow and left only a lifeless corpse under his hands. Harry suspected that the moment

any white stag died, a new one came to life in the woods and began to run.

A bit bewildered, he shook his head and turned back to find the others, hearing Pansy's words in his head again. This is the time of year when it's happiest, and it wants you to be happy, too.

It certainly seemed to want that, Harry had to admit, staring at the mass of what looked like dark green leaves and silver petals in his hand.

Draco's breathing eased when Harry came back out of the woods, his hand clasped around a shining mass. He smiled at each of the people there, the grave, sweet smile Draco had once thought reserved for him alone. But he was so happy tonight that he didn't mind other people seeing it.

"This is Walpurgis Night," Harry said clearly, holding up his hand. "This is the night that the magic returns, the night when the magic renews, the night when the Dark cries out in its power. I claim the right to speak by virtue of having survived the Darkest magic of anyone here this year."

That caused most of the other people around them to lean forward and pay attention. No one disputed Harry's claim, Draco thought. Good. They had better not. If anyone else had survived Darker magic, it should have been a matter for Daily Prophet headlines.

"I am trying to understand both Dark and Light, and what they mean," Harry said softly, almost as if he were talking to himself. "And I tend to think all the fixed definitions we use—wildness, compulsion, free will, solitude, cooperation—are wrong, at some level. Or they interact with the wild Dark and the wild Light in ways that we've ignored."

"Living in a fixed world is easier, I know, but it's not real. I'm going to try not to ignore reality any more."

He looked at Draco as he spoke. Draco stared back, enchanted at the joy in Harry's face.

Harry cast his hand up, and the silver and green flurried from them, becoming a series of lightning bolts. "May we all be unbound!" he cried.

The green and silver lightning bolts swarmed over everyone there, encircling their wrists and their throats and their heads. Draco, staring in every direction, saw Blaise crowned as a king, Millicent with a torque around her throat, Hawthorn Parkinson with bracelets of wildness.

Harry smiled, and then the music came welling from nowhere, and the dancing began, and Draco did not have time to think of individual sights anymore, not when he was whirling with multiple partners, snatched apart and bound back together again by invisible magic, and the world had shattered and shivered into slivers of joy.

Chapter Eighty-One: Long and Sweet and Slow

Harry closed his eyes and leaned back on the faint slope at the far side of the glade. The dancing had exhausted him, he'd thought at first, but then he realized that it had only exhausted his impulse to dance. He didn't go through the dark doorway when it appeared. One moment of unbinding two years ago had been enough. His mind still swarmed with images that came from encountering the magic of Walpurgis, the memories of those dead witches and wizards who had had no magical heir to absorb their powers when they died. He smiled; one memory was of a wizard who had worked all his life to create a single golden rose that would never fade for the man he loved. And why not? That was as good a use of magic as any other, Harry thought.

"Harry."

Awareness surged all over Harry's body like the prickling brush of grass along his skin. He took a deep breath, and opened his eyes, and met Draco's.

Draco stood in front of him, face illuminated by the fire someone had lit behind him when the dancing was done. Harry almost flinched at his expression. He would have expected excitement from Draco, or high solemnity; they were about to enter a ritual that would take them three years, after all. But instead there was an intent look on his face, as if he were seeing and thinking only of Harry in that moment.

Harry swallowed. He knew that he would spend this ritual in private with Draco, sharing the same space and thinking thoughts that revolved only around himself and Draco. And that, strangely, was the part that scared him the most. Without the wide world to bury himself in, there was nothing for him to hide behind, and nothing to make him think of things that weren't personal. He would have to see just one person, who in turn would be seeing him. He would have to act in a way that most people found normal, and which Harry had never been able to achieve. Terror clawed at his throat, almost burying the anticipation.

Draco's face softened then. "It's all right, Harry," he said quietly, and extended a hand. "Come, now. Mother and Father just Apparated in. And Snape is taking the place of a father to introduce you to me, isn't that right?"

Harry nodded. That had been the one requirement Draco had to tell him about. In a traditional ritual, the parents would arrange matters without even taking their children to meet each other until it was time for the courting to begin. Since Harry had neither mother nor father to stand for him, Draco had to make sure he found someone. And Snape really was the best candidate.

"Then come on," Draco coaxed, keeping his hand extended.

Harry reminded himself that he had chosen this, and terror or not, he wanted what would come after this. The want strangled the terror, and permitted him to reach up and take Draco's hand.

Draco watched Harry's face as he guided him a bit apart from the gathering, to the secondary glade in the woods where Narcissa and Lucius were waiting for them. Draco had described the woods as precisely as he could to his father via the communication spell, and Lucius had recognized the place. Apparently this was a real forest after all, but so touched by the magic of Walpurgis Night as to be half-transformed.

Harry's eyes were wider than Draco had ever seen them, and they flicked from side to side as if trying to insure that no one followed them. Now and then a muscle in his cheek twitched, or his hand rose and rubbed across his face as if he were trying to hold great emotions in. That was all right with Draco. He would have been more worried if Harry had been the calm, composed statue he often was in dangerous situations. That would have implied that he considered this just another uncomfortable necessity to be got through, an oath he had to take to secure an ally.

This was so much more than that, and while Draco knew Harry's perceptions of it weren't the same as his, he wanted them to match more closely with his than they normally did. He hadn't touched Harry after that initial handclasp. The ritual said they weren't supposed to.

His fingers twitched with the urge to, though. And his mind rang with sweetness.

For once, they would be alone, without Harry's stupid brother to interrupt them, or Professor Snape to insist that Harry needed to rest, or any yearmates stumbling in to go to sleep. Harry wouldn't have an excuse to talk about anything but Draco and himself. That would be what was scaring him, of course, but Draco trusted him to have refused the ritual if he was too terrified to go through with it. He had to trust him that far, or they would never have an equal relationship. He would always be the shepherd, the parent, mistrusting Harry's decisions the way Snape tended to do.

They caught up with Snape at the edge of the glade. He frowned at Draco and stared hard at Harry, but Harry met his eyes calmly enough and said, "Thank you for doing this, sir."

That seemed to decide Snape. He nodded, once, and strode behind them. Draco eyed him and was impressed. Unless someone had known the professor of old and memorized the way he moved, it was hard to tell that he still limped.

They passed several small mounds and roots and holes in the ground that seemed to take forever in the dark; certainly they would have been smaller obstacles in daylight. The oddly brilliant light of the moon helped sustain them, though, as well as keeping them bathed in dark green and silver—Slytherin colors. Draco couldn't imagine a better omen in a joining where both partners were Slytherins. Yes, Walpurgis Night had definitely been the right time to begin this ritual, though the romantic in Draco had thought Harry's birthday might be the best choice at first.

Strength was flooding him as they walked. Draco couldn't tell if it was emotional or magical, and he didn't care. He lifted his head, and the moonlight made the hair on his arms and neck stand on end. The sky was dark blue, he realized, not dark green, introducing a third color into their world. That was all right. The dark blue didn't have any particular significance in terms of Houses, since it was deeper than the Ravenclaw shade of blue, but they could adopt it and give it a

significance. Perhaps they would exchange dark blue stones with each other in the pivot ritual of Halloween next year.

From ahead came the glimmer of white; Draco knew that was shining from his mother's dark robes, hemmed with an edging as bright as diamond dust. She had shown them to him the day they went to Grimmauld Place over Easter holidays. Draco knew they symbolized new life, the rising generation, taking over from the old, since they imitated the colors of the night and the waxing moon. Of course, neither of his parents was old yet, but the symbolism was important.

Lucius was clad in plain black, though his hair, free and flowing to his shoulders, mimicked his wife's robe hem. He turned and nodded to Draco. He stood beside Narcissa at the top of a small slope, Draco saw, dipping down into a tiny bowl of grass. He and Harry could lie in it side by side and have just a little room to spare.

Well, good. Since neither of us is going to be leaving that bowl for the rest of the night, and we're not going to be playing Quidditch...

"Son," Lucius greeted him as he came nearer.

"Father," Draco returned. They were supposed to refer to each other by relationships for this part of the ritual, not names. He hoped Harry would remember that.

He moved over to stand between his parents. Harry walked to the opposite side of the bowl to stand with Snape at his right shoulder. Draco had thought he might look forlorn without a mother, but Harry just looked hesitant, a bit shy and eminently touchable.

Draco shook his head to stop thoughts like that, and locked his eyes with Harry's as his father performed the introductions, flawlessly.

"I, Lucius Malfoy, present my son for this joining, the first of thirteen, begun on Walpurgis Night," he murmured. "He was born on the fifth of June nearly sixteen years ago, and he has my consent for his ritual and his partner." For a moment, his hand pressed heavily on Draco's shoulder. "He is my magical heir."

"I, Narcissa Black," said his mother softly then, "present my son for this joining, the first of thirteen, begun on Walpurgis Night." Draco flashed a tiny glance at her, and was startled by the unearthly joy in her face. Of course, Narcissa had told him that her main goal was to see him as happy as possible, and that she trusted Harry would make him that happy, but it was one thing to hear it and another to see it. "I bore him in pain and received him in joy on the fifth of June nearly sixteen years ago. May another now receive him as I did." She bowed her head and stepped back.

Draco hoped that Snape would remember his part in the ritual, but he should have known better. After all, Snape could remember complicated Potions instructions off the top of his head. What had the potential to trip him up was the exact wording he had to use.

"I, Severus Snape," he said, voice grinding like a whetstone on a sword, "present my—my son for this joining, the first of thirteen, begun on Walpurgis Night." Draco wondered if Snape was aware of the expression on Harry's face as he stared up at him, but he doubted it; Snape was too caught up in struggling through his own emotions. "He was born on the thirty-first of July nearly sixteen years ago, and he has my consent for his ritual and his partner." Snape took a deep breath. "He is not my son by blood, but he is by love."

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. Draco waited. Even his parents waited, with no sign of impatience. Draco could feel Lucius's eyes on Snape. He wasn't sure he wanted to see what they held, though.

Then the moment was past, and Draco felt the magic, called and shaped by the ritual, pouring into its mold, taking over around them. Gentle hands tugged on his robes, urging him forward, down the side of the slope and into the grassy bowl. Draco walked easily enough, glancing down now and then to catch a glimpse of the pullers. Bright golden eyes winked and flashed and vanished again. Draco could feel his parents and Snape both turning away, fulfilling the ritual's instruction to leave them alone.

Harry stumbled a bit on his way down, but arrived at the same time Draco did. Draco put out his hands, letting them clasp Harry's single one and rest on his left wrist. Then he closed his eyes. He'd practiced

this, both over the Easter holidays and as Walpurgis approached, but he still hadn't been entirely sure he could do it.

Accio, he commanded in his head, wandless and nonverbal, since he couldn't move his hands. Accio Arcturus's ring.

The magic in the ritual helped; Draco could feel it swirling lazily around the sides of the bowl, turning its attention towards him, and then diving into his pockets. A moment later, the ring bumped at Draco's side like an eager puppy. Draco took a deep breath that he hoped sounded like a sigh of anticipation and not a sigh of relief, and then shifted his fingers to clasp it. Harry stared at him as Draco took the ring in his right hand and held it up.

"This is a treasure of the Black bloodline, Harry," he murmured, "the ring that my Cousin Arcturus supposedly proposed to his wife with. It comes from my mother. Her blood flows in my veins, and she bore me, and with this night a new joining between us is born. Do you accept my gift?" He held the ring out towards Harry, wondering if he remember the words that Draco had wound up whispering to him earlier this afternoon.

Harry remembered. His face was pale, not even counting the moonlight, but he nodded and whispered, "In blood we begin this joining, on earth, in the sight of the dark spaces between the stars." He flexed his hand as much as he could, since it was resting under Draco's left one, and Draco maneuvered enough to fit the ring over Harry's finger without letting go of his hand. When it was in place, they both regarded it for a moment; Draco felt no need to hurry on to the next part of the joining, and of course Harry didn't know what they were supposed to do next.

The ring was plain silver, a relatively thin band. The stone it bore was a jacinth, a deep reddish-purple gem that resembled heart's blood. Supposedly, the moment Arcturus Black had given it to his wife was the one moment in his life when he had ever been serious.

And, technically of course, the ring was Harry's already, along with all the other Black treasures, so it joined them in yet another circle, yet another cycle. Draco found himself satisfied with that. In fact, the

whole evening so far filled him with deep satisfaction. Things were happening the way they were supposed to, the way they should and always had, despite Harry's unconventional parents, despite Harry's power, despite the fact that Draco knew his father would have acquired a frozen look at the mere thought of a Malfoy and a Potter joining five years ago. Draco had never felt more pureblood, more united to a tradition that stretched back for centuries and did not falter, and he had never felt more content in being so.

He stepped back, took a deep breath, and lifted his eyes to Harry's face. "The gift is accepted," he said, beginning the next part of the ritual. "The ordinary has begun its transformation into the extraordinary. What we share this night is between the two of us, Harry."

When he spoke his partner's name, the magic of the ritual once more picked up. Tiny sparks appeared around them, then rose, shining like glints of light on water. They grew more and more prevalent as Draco watched, and evolved into a sheer curtain that shut them off from the outside world. In moments, there was only him, the grassy bowl, and Harry. The world ended in a white-golden haze.

"What do I say?" Harry hissed at him. Draco looked at him and saw that his face was almost white.

Perhaps I should have insisted that he take some interest in the ritual after all. But Draco had not wanted to insist. What mattered was that Harry wanted this, and the extent of his interest and desire wasn't for Draco to dictate.

"Harry," he said, again, and the light sparks danced as if they liked the sound. "From here on out, the experience and not the wording is what is important. My name, though. I'd like to hear that."

Harry gave a little shudder, as if this were the first time they had moved past calling each other by surnames, and murmured, "Draco."

The sparks twitched again, and then grew brighter and brighter, filling the glade with an odd mixture of daylight and moonlight. Draco nodded in satisfaction, and smiled a bit at the look of awe on Harry's

face. He wondered if Harry even knew he looked like that when he encountered a new magical object or process.

“Thank you,” he said softly. “Now, shall we begin?”

“That wasn’t the beginning yet?” Harry shivered in spite of himself. He’d already felt more focused on Draco than he ever had. He wasn’t sure if it was magic or not, but when he tried to think about other things—the werewolf problem, Snape’s voice as he said those ritual words, the decidedly odd look Lucius had given him—his thoughts slid away from that and circled back to Draco. Surely it could not get deeper or more intense. He didn’t know what he would do if it did.

“Not the beginning, not quite yet,” said Draco softly. His words had already altered in timber and tone from what they’d been a moment ago, though his voice had been quiet then, too. Now, he sounded as if he were much closer to Harry, though of course that was impossible. “But now.”

He lifted his head and looked over Harry’s shoulder. Harry turned, wondering if someone had managed to walk through the barrier after all.

But it wasn’t a person; it was an object. Harry blinked as he watched it resolve into a harp, the same color as the light that surrounded them. It hung in midair, strings vibrating. Then they began to play, and Harry heard a delicate tune he didn’t recognize. It was beautiful, as everything about the ritual had been, but Harry wondered what he was supposed to do with it, how he was supposed to respond.

“Harry,” said Draco, and Harry turned back. Draco’s expression had changed again. Now he wore a look of deep calm, and he bowed and extended both his hands. “Would you dance with me?”

Harry closed his eyes and stood still for a long moment. He could do this. He didn’t need to worry about tripping over his own feet, or making a fool of himself. Only Draco was here to see him, and he wouldn’t laugh.

"I don't know the tune," said Harry, even though he was already stepping forward, settling his hand on Draco's shoulder. He wondered what to do with his other arm, until Draco clasped his left wrist in his right hand and stretched it away from his body.

"That's all right," Draco said, and a smile shadowed his face, playing around his lips, never quite forming. "I wanted this to happen since we never got to share a dance at the Yule Ball. The music will adapt itself to us, Harry. You don't need to worry about that." He actually closed his eyes as he began dancing, and Harry wondered if the intensity was overwhelming for him.

It was for Harry, though he and Draco weren't actually dancing all that close together. Their feet shuffled more or less in time, and the grass rustled under it with soft damp sounds, and the light shone steadily, letting them see where they were going. Harry felt dew soaking his shoes, climbing up through the edges of his robes. He smelled something wild and clean that was probably the scent of plants growing untended.

And he was aware of the muscles flexing under his hand, shifting and twitching with more motions than Harry had known they were capable of as Draco switched positions and turned, and, once or twice, whirled sharply. He could hear Draco's light, steady breathing, which seemed to grip Harry as much as his arms did. He could smell him, which wasn't something Harry had much experience with at all. He smelled—like a human, really. Harry couldn't describe it in poetic terms.

But they were close, and the warmth from Draco's body seeped out to him to contrast with the coolness of the dew, and after some time Harry became aware that Draco had opened his eyes and was watching him, still with his face set in those calm, peaceful lines.

Harry swallowed, but didn't look away. He hadn't realized that Draco was capable of looking like this, not only calm but happy. He didn't look as though he needed to rush off somewhere and do something else. He wasn't worrying about homework, or that Harry's life was in danger. When he cocked his head, it was because he wanted to and not because he was listening for the sounds of enemies.

Draco had gray eyes and a sharp face, Harry had always known that, but now he didn't have to look quickly and then look away again. Now he could stare, and he fell into the staring, into how Draco's chin and cheeks hooked together, into how his blond hair slid halfway down his brow when he turned his head, how his eyes had a direct stare when he focused them the way—

The way he was doing now.

Harry wouldn't have cared if Draco was beautiful if the soul inside hadn't attracted him; after all, Bellatrix Black Lestrange had been beautiful in her time, and Harry could imagine a beautiful Lucius killing without a pause. Lily had raised him not to care that much about physical beauty. He was never going to have a lover or a spouse anyway, not with all the time he had to devote to Connor, so who cared if he appreciated what the people around him looked like? What mattered with political allies was how he could persuade them and what it took to make them stay persuaded.

But this was the boy who had refused to leave him alone for the entirety of first year, even when Harry came up with what he thought were clever and creative solutions to drive him far, far away. This was the friend who had declared himself Harry's friend again at the beginning of second year, after Harry had spent several weeks ignoring him. This was the comrade-in-arms who had followed him down into the Chamber of Secrets, even though he hated Connor and had every reason to be terrified of Riddle, because he didn't want Harry to go alone. This was the thinker who had studied unconscious compulsion to see if Harry had influenced him unduly with his power, concluded that he might have but he could never know the full extent of it, and decided to stay Harry's friend anyway. This was the stubborn, insistent terrier who'd picked up the pieces just as he promised he would when Harry came to Malfoy Manor after taking his mother's magic, and tried his very hardest to accompany Harry to the Shrieking Shack, then sulked when he realized he couldn't share directly in what had happened there.

This was the wizard impatient for power who'd made a potentially horrible mistake in summoning an ancestral ghost on Halloween, of

all nights, and been lucky that she simply chose to give him empathy instead of kill him. This was the Malfoy who had swallowed being an empath and chosen to learn and live with it. This was the sulky boy who had decided that not telling Harry he was in love with him for months was a good idea, and who had then fought incredibly hard to convince Harry it was all right when he learned the truth on his own. This was the almost Gryffindorish Slytherin who had kissed him first and then refused to either panic or apologize, because neither would have fit what happened between them.

This was the pureblood wizard who had sworn vengeance on Bellatrix Lestrange and Voldemort for their actions against Harry, and then eagerly embraced his possession ability to do what damage he could to them. This was the idiot who'd thought that putting monitoring spells on Harry and yelling at him when he got into danger was also a good idea. This was the patient, self-controlled son of Lucius who had managed to force himself to wait for physical contact with Harry until he was ready for it. This was the chaos-rider who had faced his father rather suddenly and won just as sudden a victory. This was the son of Narcissa, whom Harry saw in the grace of his motion and the grace of his mind—more her son than Lucius's, in the end, Harry thought, more Black than Malfoy, though without, hopefully, the tendency to go mad and not tell people important secrets that could lead to the saving of lives.

This was Draco.

Draco's breath was coming short by the time Harry started concentrating on him as the person he was at that moment and not all the people he had been, and Harry tilted his own head. "Are you all right?" he asked. "Do you want to sit down?" His own limbs felt light enough, since the dancing hadn't been strenuous work, but he had to admit he had no idea how long they'd been doing this.

"I—think it would be a good idea," said Draco, and half-collapsed back on the sloping bank of the little dell. At once the harp stopped playing and floated back into the light. Harry assumed it floated back into the light, at least. He heard the music end, but he didn't want to look away from Draco.

Why?

Because I don't want to.

He reached out his hand and cupped Draco's cheek, tilting his head to the side. Draco went with the motion. His eyes were wide and curious, the calmness fading from his face.

Harry leaned forward, closing his own eyes to see what would happen, and kissed Draco with steady determination. Draco didn't hesitate before kissing back, but Harry hadn't expected him to.

Draco did try to shift positions, but Harry nudged him with his left arm, and Draco remained where he was. Harry was comfortable like this, with both of their heads at the same height and himself the one touching Draco. It had been the other way around so often. Harry had known, intellectually and for a long time, that that would have to change.

Now he thought he was finally ready emotionally for it to happen. He wanted to touch Draco.

He kept his hand still on Draco's face, but gently nudged at Draco's lips with his tongue to get them to open. When they did, Harry catalogued how Draco's cheek felt, flexing underneath his palm, the softness and warmth of his mouth, the fact that kissing him like this made sweetness fill his own head until he could barely think and a sharp feeling wake up at the base of his spine.

He opened his eyes, and met Draco's stunned, half-drowning gray ones. He had gone from curious to completely surprised.

Well, good, Harry thought. I should be able to surprise him once in a while, and not just because of the danger I rush into.

He pulled away from the kiss and murmured, "Can I touch you? Anywhere I want? Is there anywhere that you wouldn't feel comfortable with?"

“Merlin, Harry, no,” said Draco, and leaned forward, his legs drawing together and his arms folding on top of them to support his head as Harry began to run his hand over Draco’s shoulders. “I—whatever you want. Please.” Harry wasn’t entirely sure he was supposed to hear the words that followed after that. “I’ve been waiting for this for so long.”

Harry nodded, though Draco didn’t seem to see the gesture, and shuffled around on his knees to stroke Draco’s shoulders. Draco didn’t seem to know whether to melt into the caress or stay where he was and passive. Harry did see the skin at the corners of his eyes crinkle as he squeezed them shut.

Harry trailed his fingers down Draco’s shoulder blades and over his spine, light, quick motions to learn a back he thought he should already know well by now. He did it several times before he realized that something was wrong. He frowned and cocked his head, trying to figure out what it was, then nodded.

His magic calmly Vanished Draco’s robes and shirt. Draco started at that and made a small sound that—Harry paused. “Did you just squeak?” he asked incredulously.

Draco turned enough to look at him through hazy, but decidedly indignant, gray eyes. “I did not squeak. I couldn’t have.”

“And why not?” Harry murmured, reaching out and pressing his hand flat against Draco’s back.

“Because Malfoys don’t—ah, Harry.” That word was half a groan, and Draco dropped his head forward again.

“You’re half Black,” said Harry. “Maybe Blacks do.” He had to shift, a bit, because his own arousal was distracting him. He tried to stifle numerous contradictory urges, and settled on the one to move his hand in what was partly a caress and partly a tickling motion. Draco gasped and squirmed.

“Sensitive skin?” Harry whispered, rearing up on his knees and leaning down to whisper in Draco’s ear. Draco shivered, and Harry

nodded. "Sensitive ears, too, I see." He bent his head further, not letting himself think of anything but reverence and the fog in his head, the one emotion for Draco and the other for himself, and kissed the side of Draco's neck. Draco jumped as though someone had pinched his arse, and then uttered a low sound that had no name, but was distinctly one of pleasure. Harry grinned against his skin. "Maybe that's the kind of noise Malfoys make," he said.

Draco made a complicated rolling motion that ended up with Harry in his arms and half-sprawled on the slope of the glade. Draco stared into his eyes, and whispered, "Do you have the slightest idea what you're doing to me?"

"Yes," Harry said quietly, which, by the look on Draco's face now, wasn't the answer he'd expected. "I do. And I want to keep doing it, unless you don't want me to."

Draco closed his eyes and took a breath that made it seem as if he were trying to breathe water. "I—I can't just yet, Harry," he whispered. "There's your training to think of, and the ritual, and—" He stopped.

"Draco," said Harry, surprised at him. "It's all right to admit that you're nervous, too, you know."

Draco blinked, then smiled. "I should have known you would pick up on that," he muttered. "All right. Can—can I touch you back, Harry? It doesn't seem fair that I've had so much of the intensity so far, and you've had precious little."

"You're underestimating how good it feels to touch you," said Harry, while anticipation ran through him like a shudder of sunlight. "But yes. Please." He shifted into a more comfortable position, sitting rather than lying, and waited.

Draco took a moment to look at Harry in silence. Harry watched him back, green eyes gentle, face more relaxed than Draco had ever seen it. And he gave an impatient little wriggle when Draco went on staring at him.

"You said you would," he muttered.

Draco felt his mouth widen in what could have been either a smile or a smirk. 'Yes, I did,' he said softly, and then leaned forward so that he could slide his hands directly beneath Harry's robes, rounding the sides of his waist and skimming up to his chest. He didn't try to remove Harry's clothes. He wanted the sensation of touching him under the cloth, his movements sharply restricted, at least as much as Harry had wanted the sense of touching him without barriers.

Whenever his fingers prodded or pushed something that made Harry give any sort of sound or motion, Draco paused and repeated it, then repeated it again, until he was sure he would know the place again when he had Harry finally in bed. A map gradually formed under his fingers, and even when he closed his eyes, he found he imagined it more as sensations of softness, warmth, small dips and hollows, rather than getting a visual image. That was all right. He would be proud and pleased to know Harry with more than one sense, and he already knew what he looked like.

Harry's breaths were fast and soft as Draco touched him, faster as the touching went on. He'd let his head loll to the side and his eyes shut. Probably he'd done it to make his enjoyment of the sensations more intense, but it also showed how utterly vulnerable he was, and how much he didn't care about that. He trusted Draco with a part of himself that no one else ever got to see. Draco felt two lazy spirals of fire turn in him at the thought of that, one in his chest and one in his groin. And no one else ever will get to see it.

Finally, he pulled his hands out from beneath Harry's robe and slid them up to his neck and face. Just as Harry's eyes opened, he pulled him into another kiss, while his fingers drifted down the side of his neck. He'd noticed one place that always made Harry shiver absently when his robe collar or an insect brushed it. If he could just find it again...

A faint shudder from Harry, and Draco knew he'd found it. He sat back, breaking the kiss so suddenly that Harry had no time to react, and then dropped his head and fastened his mouth on the place.

Harry let out a sharp, shocked cry of pleasure. Draco opened his mouth a bit, and used his tongue and teeth, in absurdly light touches that nevertheless made Harry jerk and twist around, grabbing him.

“Draco, Merlin, enough!” he said. His eyes were brilliant green, flaring like Draco had only seen them flare in the Woodhouse battle, right after he’d killed Fenrir Greyback and Draco had killed his consort. “Come here, damn it.”

He tackled him, and for a moment they rolled confusedly down the tiny hill, winding up again at the bottom of the glade. Harry waited until they stopped moving before he insistently kissed Draco, his mouth fastening on his in a half-biting motion that Draco wouldn’t have expected.

Draco wrapped his arms around Harry and kissed back, riding out the fierce contact, until it melted into one like they’d shared in the courting room. Even that, Draco thought, was only a shadow of the one their future images had shared, and he felt a different kind of warmth in his chest at the thought that they still had something to grow towards. Wonderful as this was, it wouldn’t be the same forever.

Harry lifted his head after a moment, and smiled down at him. His mouth was sloppy, his hair sloppier, his face so flushed that he looked as if he’d swallowed a vial of Pepperup Potion, and he obviously didn’t care.

“Did you know,” he said, “that you make me really, really, really happy?”

Draco swallowed, and told himself that neither Blacks nor Malfoys had license to cry right now. But he did give a grin that hurt his face and probably made him look quite as ridiculous as if he’d cried.

Harry stooped over him and kissed him one more time, then sat up. “Come on,” he said, and snapped his fingers. Draco’s robes and shirt appeared again, draped over the place on the bank where they’d sat to touch each other. “The ritual is over.”

Draco smiled. Yes, it was; the melting of the light wall around them would have signified that if nothing else. But Harry had no question in his voice. He was simply self-confident enough to feel that they'd been taken out of the world and were now coming back, and not to question his judgment. This, despite the fact that he hadn't studied the ritual, and a year ago he wouldn't have dared to assume something like that without Draco telling him so.

The most wonderful thing about him, Draco thought, watching as Harry stood looking up at the moon for a moment while he put his clothes back on, is that I don't think he'll ever be done. Next year's ritual will be different, and not just because it's further along in the courting. He'll be different. He never stays the same. What was his mother thinking, believing she could chain him in one shape for the rest of his life?

Harry turned and caught him staring. He gave him an easy smile and stretched out a hand, pulling Draco to his feet in one smooth motion.

"Come on," he murmured. "I can feel Snape's magic back in the place where we danced. He's waiting for us."

He moved his hand to Draco's shoulder for a moment and squeezed, then turned and walked out of the glade. The silver ring on his finger glinted as the moonlight caught it.

Draco closed his eyes and let the intensity run out of him like pure water out of a cup. For a moment, he lingered in the space the ritual had created, amid deep green grass and bright silver moonlight and dark blue sky, while happiness filled him like a herd of galloping unicorns.

Then he opened his eyes and hastened after his partner.

Chapter Eighty-Two: Of Man and Wolf

Harry sat down at the Slytherin table, and wondered how long it would take everyone to notice. Millicent was first, it turned out, as Harry reached for the pumpkin juice and the lights in the Great Hall made silver light dance off his finger. Her hand shot out and gripped his wrist, holding it still.

Harry grinned and let her examine his ring. It was a bit annoying, not being able to reach for something else while his hand was held like this, but he was enjoying the expression of sheer shock and disbelief on Millicent's face.

"That's a jacinth, Harry, isn't it?" she asked at last, never taking her eyes from the red-purple stone.

"It is," Harry said agreeably, and wriggled his fingers. Millicent let his hand go, and he fetched the jug of pumpkin juice and poured some into his glass, while all the while her gaze tried to drill holes in the side of his head. "Meant to symbolize heart's blood, at least in this particular shade. I know a jacinth might come in other colors, and I can't remember what those mean."

"You actually do—" Millicent stopped for a moment as though she had to reconsider what she was saying, and then murmured, "You really do mean to complete this joining ritual with Draco, then?"

Harry blinked. That wasn't the reaction he'd expected her to have. "Yes, of course I do," he said. "Unless you tell me that you and Draco have been secretly arranged to be married from birth?"

"If we had been," Draco said, dropping into place on the other side of him, "I would have killed her and hidden her body by now. Then it would be off to the Manor to Obliviate my parents. Really, Harry, don't you know any of the traditional steps to getting yourself free of an unwanted marriage?"

Millicent laughed, but it looked almost as if she were doing it in spite of herself. Her gaze was calculating as it shifted back and forth between Harry and Draco. "It's not that," she said. "Nothing like that.

It's just—it has to be the three-year ritual, since you started it on Walpurgis Night."

"Very good, Bulstrode," Draco drawled, helping himself to kippers. Harry wondered if he was the only one who noticed the tension in Draco's shoulders, and underlying the light voice. "I suppose the next incredible fact you'll tell me is that this day used to be called Beltane."

"You don't understand, Draco," said Millicent, and then swept a bow to him that had no trace of mockery in it. "I'm very happy for you both. I think it's a wonderful idea. I'm going to suggest it to Pierre, in fact, though I think we'll want to wait a few years before we begin even that."

"Pierre?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Pierre Delacour." Millicent flashed him a smug smile. "He attended your little meeting on the equinox. It seems that he's impressed by strength."

"Well, congratulations then," said Harry. He wondered if he should be more put off by the idea of Millicent deciding to marry someone she'd evidently just met, but then shrugged. If Millicent was happy, why should the idea concern him? Just because it wasn't something he'd do didn't mean it was wrong. "But what is it that you're so surprised about, if you don't care who Draco joins with or who I do?"

"I didn't think you would have the strength of mind to do this, Harry, especially so soon," said Millicent quietly. "To fight a war, to make allies, and maybe even to make a political marriage or joining—I thought all of those were in your power. But not this."

"I—thank you," said Harry, wondering if he ought to be complimented or insulted. Then again, Millicent was the one who had caught him cutting his own arm to practice healing spells. Perhaps he should simply be grateful that she had kept her promise not to tell anyone about that, and not surprised that she would think his training still strong. "And, well, it is."

“Congratulations,” Millicent repeated solemnly, and turned back to her breakfast.

Blaise noticed next, yawning and stretching so much that his eyes were scrunched shut when he sat down. Then he opened them, caught sight of Harry’s ring, and appeared to jump a foot in the air.

“It’s true, then?” he asked when he came down, as if he hadn’t just shown surprise that still had Draco snickering. His large dark eyes studied Harry as if he expected his face to peel off and reveal one of the Weasley twins beneath. “You really are getting joined, and to a Malfoy?”

“The only one available, yes,” said Harry, and exchanged an amused look with Draco. “I rather think Lucius and Narcissa would be angry with me if I hinted I was joining with one of them.”

“Not what I meant,” said Blaise, and went on studying them, eyes so narrow that Draco finally spoke.

“And what did you mean, Blaise?”

The other boy blinked, as though awakening from a dream. “Nothing in particular,” he said, and began pouring pumpkin juice as if saving the world from Voldemort depended on how much juice he could get into a glass. Harry chewed around his sausages now—Argutus had liked sunbathing in the entrance hall too much to join him this morning—and watched him. He supposed Blaise was trying to decide where he stood. His mother was Harry’s formal ally now, an oath sworn while they’d been at the equinox gathering. Blaise had not joined in the oath, and neither had he come onto the stage with his mother when Harry introduced her to his potential allies.

I don’t really think he’d join Voldemort. But he’s known me from the beginning, and he’s not in love with me like Draco is, and he doesn’t have the personality of a follower like Greg and Vince do. I’m not surprised that he has trouble deciding how to relate to me.

Somehow, perhaps because other people were paying closer attention to the Slytherin table than Harry had thought or because

Millicent hadn't bothered to keep her voice quiet, the news spread. Harry had several people congratulate him before the end of breakfast, including Cho, Ginny—who pretended Blaise didn't exist—and Zacharias. Zacharias, of course, nodded sagely and said, "I suppose it's the next best thing."

"What is?" Harry asked, amused, sure he could enjoy what was coming, even if Draco didn't.

"That you're getting joined to a Dark wizard. We could have used you on the Light side." Zacharias cocked his head and eyed Harry. "If you were a bit more intelligent, Harry, we might have made a go of it."

"Sod off, Smith," said Draco, with unexpected viciousness. Harry rolled his eyes and nudged Draco's shoulder with his. Zacharias was being pompous because that was the way he was, and whether Draco was jealous or angry at the implied insult to Harry, he should know that Zacharias wouldn't change his mind for either circumstance.

"As you wish, Malfoy," said Zacharias. "And I wish you luck in trying to control him. You should have realized by now that Harry does whatever he wants, and he's as much Light as Dark." He nodded to Harry and then trotted off towards the other side of the Great Hall to fetch Hermione.

"What did he mean by that?" Draco demanded.

"I think he thought that you were angry at the implication that I'd join with a Light wizard," Harry murmured, and bit into his eggs. He had to admit that they tasted a little better than they used to, when his main impression of them was "slippery." Perhaps avoiding porridge and trying food that had more flavor was working to overcome his training after all. "Not at anything else that he might have said."

"I wasn't," said Draco. "Not at all. I'm angry because that isn't supposed to happen."

"What isn't?" Harry eyed Draco curiously. He didn't know much about the history of the ritual, or how other people were supposed to receive the joined couple once their joining had been announced.

Perhaps Zacharias really had just delivered a stinging insult under the cover of a few innocent words.

“He’s not supposed to joke about that,” said Draco. “This ritual is a solemn one, and I’m doing everything right. He has no right to imply that this is just a joining like others.”

Harry cleared his throat to hide his amusement. So it’s his Malfoy pride that’s stung. I should have known. “Draco, of course we can’t expect anyone else to take it as seriously as we do. They’re not the ones getting joined.”

“So you do take it seriously, then?” Draco turned on him like a whirlwind.

Harry blinked, but he could see what Draco needed, even if he wasn’t entirely sure why he needed it. He leaned forward and kissed him gently. Draco didn’t melt against him, but he did relax enough to listen when Harry pulled away again.

“More seriously than anything else I’ve ever done,” said Harry. And that was true. With other things he’d done, including securing allies and fighting in battles, he’d known he could do them because he’d trained for them. A certain amount of ease, even carelessness, was part of his manner around them. But outside the confines of the ritual, being Draco’s known partner would be a constant challenge. He still didn’t know how to act normal; he missed numerous small cues, and he tended to interpret others’ emotions differently than Draco would. So he had to pay attention to this, take it seriously, in order to survive it and make it pleasant.

Draco’s face flushed slightly, and he nodded. “Thank you, Harry,” he said. “I really shouldn’t have doubted you.”

Harry patted his shoulder. “Finish your breakfast,” he said. “You should eat all of it, really. After all, OWLS are coming up. Kippers improve the memory.”

“They do not,” said Draco, but nevertheless started eating his kippers.

Harry returned to his own breakfast, aware of the pressure of eyes from all sides. There would be people like Zacharias and Blaise thinking of their joining in a political light, Harry knew, as well as those who sincerely wished them well. There would even be those who murmured that he ought to have considered joining to someone from a dedicated Light family, just to balance the pressure of the Dark allies around him. Yes, that was an unreasonable demand to make of a normal person, but Harry wasn't a normal person, and Lords and Lord-level wizards had to watch what they did.

Harry didn't care. They were perfectly free to stare and mutter all they liked, so long as none of it entailed their trying to actually separate him from Draco. He would write to Laura Gloryflower and ask her what she thought he should do to balance the Dark around him with a bit of Light. Moody had arrived, but he had such a reputation that most of the northern Light families, and his other, more tentative allies, wouldn't be satisfied with just that.

The next day breathed tension, and Harry really couldn't blame anyone. It was the second of May, normally not in anyone's pantheon of special days. It was a day closer to Midsummer, but the number of people who knew about that was very carefully small; Harry had talked to his allies, of course, and to some of the older students in the dueling club whom he trusted to be able to help him, but he wasn't about to start spreading the plan around like rain yet.

But it was the first night of the full moon, the first full moon since Elder Gillyflower was bitten. Most people were on edge for a werewolf attack. The Daily Prophet contained another interview with the captive werewolf Evergreen. The Wizengamot was still trying to get answers out of him instead of just sending him to Tullianum, because of his age. He spoke vague prophetic hints, and smiled. It was driving everyone mad, evidently, even Rita Skeeter.

Harry almost expected to get a letter. He had just hoped it would be from Remus, and that it would contain a promise of there being no attacks tonight, no reason to make Harry fear the full moon as if he were a werewolf himself. But it wasn't from Remus. The handwriting was unfamiliar, spiky, elegant, and Harry could hear the fear that the writer was trying so desperately to hide.

May 2nd, 1996

Dear Harry:

I have left this until the last minute because I still believed I would be able to get help elsewhere. Now I learn that I cannot. I thought I had true friends, given their outrage over what had happened to me, and now I learn they are less true as the moon approaches.. I—am not pleased about that, and not pleased about writing you, either, but you are the only source of Wolfsbane I know.

I have heard that you will brew the potion for anyone who asks. I do not ask that you give it to me for free. I can pay. My friends have been unaccountably slow to strip her property from the newest registered werewolf, the only kindness they have shown me. They say that I can survive confinement in Tullianum without it, but I have been studying. I know that the first full moon is often the hardest, that ten percent of all new werewolves lose their minds then and bite themselves to death if they do not have Wolfsbane.

And, of course, neither Amelia Bones nor anyone else who is willing to pass laws to avenge me will actually be seen distributing the potion to me, in case it leads to “unfortunate images.”

I am begging you, and I do not like begging. I will come to Hogwarts this afternoon—in secret, so that you do not have to fear the political repercussions from your werewolf friends for giving me the potion. If you have a vial of Wolfsbane on hand, please meet me near the lake when classes end. You may bring whatever guards you like with you, to protect you and assure you that I am trustworthy. If you do not have the potion, then I will accept Amelia’s invitation to Tullianum tonight and let whatever is coming come.

Sincerely,

Emily Gillyflower,

Former Wizengamot Elder, now Werewolf.

Harry let out a harsh breath as he finished the letter, and shook his head. He did have some Wolfsbane he'd brewed and not used, because Remus now had the money to afford his own—and he had insisted on buying it elsewhere last month. He could oblige the Elder. What made him angry wasn't even her haughty tone, mixed with broken pleading, but the fact that she'd been put in this position in the first place.

How is she really different from Hawthorn, whom Greyback bit because she wouldn't oblige him in his attempts to resurrect Voldemort? How can I say that Evergreen is different from Fenrir, or Loki different from Voldemort?

Of course, his mind and his common sense wouldn't let him think like that. Loki did seem to have a cause he believed in wholeheartedly and absolutely, while Harry thought Voldemort's cause was himself, whatever nonsense he spouted about pureblood superiority. And, of course, Hawthorn's bite had been meant to remain secret, a shameful thing, while the werewolves seemed to have been prepared either to blackmail Gillyflower or to roll with things if she told the Wizengamot she was bitten. But it didn't excuse making other people victims, taking away their wills.

"Harry."

Harry blinked and slowly opened his eyes. He started to realize that he was seeing the world through a blue curtain of phoenix fire. The bench beneath him was smoldering, but slowly, as if the wood wanted to savor such a wonderful experience as burning in the sweet flames. Draco had a hand outstretched to him, his eyes calm and his breathing a bit fast.

"Well, that's one of the keys to phoenix fire, then," Harry muttered as he forced the flames back inside his skin. "Righteous anger. It's probably what Fawkes was feeling when he died."

Draco nodded, and murmured *Finite Incantatem* at the bench, ending its burning. Then he shook his head at Harry. "You're a mess," he said. "And you need new clothes, these are all covered with ash. Let's go back to the common room, and you can tell me all about it."

Harry cast a quick Tempus charm. They should have just enough time to do that if they hurried, he thought, and he could still get to Defense Against the Dark Arts. "All right," he said shortly, standing.

Draco turned to him the moment they were out of the room, and raised an eyebrow. Harry looked down at the parchment. The outer edges had crisped, taking a few letters off some words, but the majority was still readable. He held it out to Draco, and watched him read it, with a faint frown.

"I suppose it sounds genuine," said Draco, reluctantly. "After all, if it was a trap, she would have probably asked you to come alone. But I still think we should have Professor Snape with us, and Moody. Hopefully it'll be just an exchange, and you can give her the Wolfsbane, and she'll leave. If not, we'll be ready."

Harry nodded. "That's what I thought. I can't ignore this if it is genuine; she could use her bitterness to speak about how I'm ignoring werewolves after I promised to fight for their rights. But I'm not taking the chance that it's a trap the way that the vision of my aunt and cousin was."

Draco gave him a harsh kiss, which left Harry blinking. "Good," said Draco fiercely. "I don't want you in any avoidable danger again, Harry. I know you can take care of yourself, but I can't stand the damage to my heart. Really, do you want me to die of fear before I'm sixteen years old?"

The weight he gave the words made the retort Harry could have used slip his mind. "You're going to be sixteen on June fifth," he said slowly.

"How kind of you to remember!" Draco tilted his head as he steered Harry firmly into the Slytherin common room; Harry had a tendency to forget walking when he was caught up in a point. "Are you going to remember that my father's a truce-dance ally to you for an encore? Of course, now you can't, since I just gave the game away."

"Shut it," said Harry. "You're confirmed as the Malfoy magical heir now. Lucius would have let people know. So that means that you

should be holding the actual festival to celebrate the confirmation on your birthday.”

“Yes.” Draco pushed Harry towards his trunk, seeming determined to watch as Harry changed his ash-smeared robes. Harry talked to keep himself from thinking about it.

“That’s a Wednesday, though,” he said, quickly adding days. “Would I be right in assuming that you’ll hold the festival the weekend before?”

“You would.” Draco’s eyes, when Harry looked at him, were slit with amusement.

“And you’re going to need my presence there, aren’t you?” Harry finished in resignation, grimacing a bit. “The joined partner of the Malfoy magical heir can hardly be absent.”

Draco grinned faintly. “I was wondering when you would get to that part,” he said. “Yes, Harry, you’ll have to take part, but we have a month. I can give you all the etiquette lessons you’ll need, and tell you who’s most likely to attend. My father has most of the invitations accepted by now. There probably won’t be as many guests as there usually are, since traditionally part of the festival is to present a magical heir as a candidate for a marriage or joining, and there’s no need for that now. And some of them will be people you know, like Millicent and Pansy.”

Harry felt a surge of renewed confidence. If Pansy attended, then people might not spend the whole night staring at him after all. “Were you planning on telling me this at some point?” he asked.

“I wanted to see if you would figure it out on your own.” Draco was unrepentant. “If you hadn’t done it by Saturday, then yes, I would have told you.”

“Prat,” Harry said.

“That’s why you love me,” said Draco. “I’ll talk to Professor Snape about Elder Gillyflower, Harry. He may even have a few suggestions for guards that I don’t. At least we’re meeting inside the wards, so we

know that no one can Apparate in, grab you, and then Apparate out again.”

Harry nodded absently, and made sure, again, that he had his book for Defense Against the Dark Arts. Acies wouldn't scold him for missing the class on Tuesday, he knew, but he still didn't like to disappoint her.

Snape could feel every bit of his skin bristling as he strode beside Harry on his way to the lake. Part of that was due to the presence of Moody, on Harry's other side, but Snape had worked beside the man in the Order of the Phoenix for some years and learned to tolerate him. No, most of it was due to the fact that they were going to meet a woman who was a werewolf.

Snape refused to allow his breath to come short. He had also refused Harry's offer, made in private, to stay behind so that he didn't have to confront the source of his terror. He had hidden that fear for almost twenty years; not even Dumbledore knew what it had cost him to work beside Lupin. He was not about to betray himself now, and let Harry go into danger alone.

It was dangerous even if this was not a setup, as Snape was half-convinced this was. Werewolves changed when they received the bite, even as he had told Harry. And tonight the full moon would rise. Even Lupin, supposedly “tame,” had more than once gone a bit mad around that time. Emily Gillyflower might think she wanted the Wolfsbane now—and she had helpfully chosen a time that would both avoid letting Harry miss any classes and let her Apparate back home with the potion before moonrise—but she might change her mind as the afternoon traveled on.

McGonagall had checked the wards, and reassured Harry that the anti-Apparition ones were up, and that she had also received a letter from Elder Gillyflower, requesting formal permission to come onto school grounds. The new wards were working better than even the old ones had for years. Minerva had them spread through the Forbidden Forest, to warn her of anyone with hostile intentions approaching from that direction, and mantled thickly around the lake and the Quidditch Pitch—both open areas where someone might try

to break through the wards and Apparate in. Snape was confident that she had done the best she could to see the school, and the children within it, safe.

Harry carried the vial of Wolfsbane Potion in his hand, and walked with his head up, his steps alert. Not alert enough for Snape, of course, but he was coming to understand that, while Harry appreciated his protectiveness, he would rarely indulge it. They had come, and Harry had three people who would defend him with their lives—Snape was sure of that with Moody, because he had seen the old Auror look at Harry as he used to look at Dumbledore. Without Harry's agreeing to stay behind walls and wards, it would have to be enough.

And there was a woman waiting for them at the lake, huddled into a cloak. Actually, it was as good as early May weather could often be persuaded to get; yesterday's sunlight had been a welcome exception. The sky was gray, but it was warm and not raining. But Elder Gillyflower acted as though the world hated her.

Perhaps she thinks that way since the bite, Snape thought, and constrained himself from pity as he had blocked fear off. Yes, she was a victim, but in a few hours she would be capable of making other people victims.

The woman raised her head when she saw Harry, and Snape saw her nostrils flare as she sniffed. Even new-made werewolves started using their new senses. Snape put his distaste in an Occlumency pool and watched as Harry walked briskly up to the woman. Her eyes were brown, which meant they would only slowly become amber enough to be noticed, Snape knew.

"Elder Emily Gillyflower?" Harry asked.

The woman nodded. She was thin and frail, looking as if she'd recently lost weight when the cloak shifted a little. She had long gray hair that she might once have bound up in pride, and now coiled in a messy braid on the back of her head. "Yes," she whispered. "I—you came. I didn't think you would."

"Of course I did," said Harry. He held out the potion. Gillyflower's eyes closed as she took it.

"Thank you," she said, and then spent a moment looking at Harry. "You know that I did nothing to deserve this?" she asked suddenly. Her voice was rapid. "I never cared particularly for werewolves, and I helped pass the laws that condemned them, but I never walked around saying that I wanted them all hunted down." She slammed her mouth shut then, as if she were afraid of rattling on too much and losing her composure.

Harry's eyes were full of compassion as he bowed, Snape saw. "I know, ma'am," he answered. "And I think it's admirable that you bared what they'd done to you instead of keeping it secret and letting them make a pawn of you with it."

Gillyflower's eyes closed as if in pain. "A pawn," she whispered. "Yes."

And then the Disillusionment Charms dropped.

They were Disillusionment Charms of a kind Snape had never encountered before, and that was the only excuse he could think of for his not sensing them, let alone Moody's not seeing through them. Two women revealed themselves as crouched in the grass at Elder Gillyflower's feet. They unfolded as they came at Snape and Moody, moving with graceful, limber speed that revealed well enough what they were. The girl facing Snape had ragged black hair, and amber eyes, and her teeth bared.

Terror choked him alive, and his wand didn't move fast enough. He heard a shout and a crack from the side as Moody cast a spell and had it fail. These were werewolves a few hours from the full moon. Most magic wasn't going to work on them.

Harry cried out, and Snape felt the first lash of his wandless magic. The werewolf who'd grabbed him spun around, presenting her shoulder broadside to the power. She wore wildness like an aura, and the magic struck and rolled off her. From that alone, Snape knew she must have been a werewolf since she was a child.

She would be in control of her body, in control of the werewolf's senses and strength and resistance to magic, in a way that no one come to lycanthropy as an adult could be. Snape tried to reason that out in his head, and use the reason to shock himself out of his fear.

He could not. There was hot breath near his neck, bared teeth, arms stronger than a human's holding him. And there was the woman saying in a low, controlled voice, "Tell the vates to stop calling his magic. Now. Or I will infect you."

Snape managed to raise his voice. "Harry," he said, and it was a horrible croak. "Harry, stop trying to rescue us, or she'll bite."

Harry didn't respond. Snape forced his eyes open, wondering if they'd taken him, too.

He saw Harry standing as still as still, staring at the werewolf who had sprung up behind him and grabbed Draco. This one was a man, a stranger, but wearing that same wildness as the other two. He was much taller than Draco, and his teeth were locked, oh so gently, in the skin of Draco's throat. He hadn't broken the skin. Not yet. His amber eyes watched Harry. On the other side of him, the second female werewolf had downed Moody, her jaws having bitten straight through his wooden leg. She crouched on his chest and showed her teeth an inch from his eye. Moody, veteran of a hundred battles, lay quietly, but Snape could read rage in that quietude.

Harry turned at a call from the direction of the Forbidden Forest. Snape faced it, and saw a group of people loping towards them. In the lead was a wizard, his face somewhere between forty and ageless, his hair shining as pale as Draco's.

"Harry vates," he said, and halted a reasonable distance away and bowed. "My name is Loki. I think you have heard of me."

Harry made a sound that was a reasonable imitation of a growl. Loki let his tongue loll out the side of his mouth in that laughing gesture werewolves had and Snape hated.

"You may well ask yourself how we got onto the grounds," he said. "And the answer is that we have no hostile intentions towards you, vates. We could pass the wards in the Forest."

"That will be changing." Harry spoke the words like rocks hurled against glass. Snape clung to the image of his face to keep from drowning in his own fear. He thought he could edge his hand towards his wand, just a bit, just a little, until the werewolf holding him snarled in warning, and all his bones seemed to dissolve.

"Undoubtedly," said Loki pleasantly. "But not for right now. We came to prove to you that we have no hostile intentions towards you, and that will remain true. We could hurt your loved ones right now. We could infect them, or kill them. You know this. Yet we haven't."

"How," Harry breathed, "does taking them hostage prove you're not hostile?"

"Well, it doesn't in and of itself, I'll admit that," said Loki. "But it does from moment to moment. We've taken them only so that you have to listen, Harry, not to make you afraid. You're not afraid, are you? You're angry?"

"You could say that."

And Harry burst into blue flames, just as he had at the breakfast table that morning. Loki cocked his head to the side and sniffed appreciatively, then panted again. "I have heard that you were part phoenix," he said. "And now I have seen it."

"What do you want?" Harry demanded. "You must realize that I'm hardly non-hostile towards you, right now." Snape could feel his wandless magic snarling and spinning around him, a fierce beast on a short leash. He tried to think about fearing that, instead of the teeth near his neck. He couldn't. It was impossible. He felt hurt and sick, and his breath came short now despite all his efforts to keep it deep. He was light-headed.

"We want to show you that we can't be ignored," said Loki. "And to prove to you that even with the opportunity for damage, we'll still hold

back. And to show off some of the pack magic to you. How do you suppose we concealed three of our pack from you, Harry, and from your powerful Dark wizard mentor—" he bowed to Snape "—and from an Auror with an eye capable of seeing through Invisibility Cloaks?"

Harry was silent.

"Because I am here," said Loki. "And the magic of those werewolves who have been lycanthropes from children, as I have, when bonded into a true pack with a true pack leader, is not unlike the magic of a Lord or Lady with a group of companions focused tightly around them. Our minds feed into one another, and we strengthen the spells that we each perform. Those Disillusionment Charms were essentially ten charms piled on top of each other."

"You're saying that these are your Death Eaters, then." Harry used his voice like a whip.

"You are trying to make me angry, aren't you?" Loki asked mildly. "You won't succeed, Harry. No one has made me lose my temper in twenty years. I am not Fenrir Greyback. I serve no cause but that of werewolves."

"And I would have helped you," said Harry. "I swore an oath. But I did not say that I would help you immediately."

"Even in the face of such provocation?"

"The provocation was yours," Harry said, and Snape could be glad of the cold anger in his voice, even with two of the people he most loved held hostage behind him. "You bit an Elder of the Wizengamot."

Loki abruptly cocked his head and turned to look at Elder Gillyflower. "Oh, dear," he murmured. "Was she telling you tales, Harry? Saying that she'd never done anything to hurt us? That she's just a victim?" Snape saw that the Elder had closed her eyes again.

He had to close his own as the werewolf holding him snarled in apparently uncontrollable anger. He could survive this. He could. He would, because Harry needed him.

“That is not true,” said Loki. “Yes, we did bite her, and we compelled her by certain threats to come here today and not tell you of the packmates we sent with her. But she’s part of the group of witches and wizards that would most like to see us gone, Harry. She was feeling out a few other Elders of the Wizengamot, trying to gather enough support to make werewolf hunting legal again, and not just for Ministry Departments.” His voice deepened, but still there seemed to be amusement in it instead of all the other emotions Snape would have expected. “She murdered a packmate of mine two years ago. Claimed that he was breaking into her home to attack her. Yes, of course he was. That’s why they found him locked into a room of his own house, awaiting moonrise.”

Harry was silent for a long moment. Then he said, “I—heard nothing about this.”

“Of course you didn’t,” said Loki mildly. “Why would you have? There were sympathetic Aurors on the case, of course, but the moment they found out the victim was a werewolf, they hushed it up. This was in the days of Fudge, you understand, and Elder Gillyflower there was an important part of his support base. Of course they couldn’t have such a potentially embarrassing case staining her reputation. And he grew fur and howled on the full moon. So, who cared?”

“Why did you wait until now to seek vengeance, if this is true?” Harry asked.

“We waited,” said Loki, and snapped his teeth. “Scrimgeour is in power now. We thought he might be more sympathetic. My packmate’s family tried to get the case reopened. We thought Scrimgeour might dismiss Elder Gillyflower, since she was one of Fudge’s cronies. We thought you might do something, if you could be got to hear about this.

“And then we realized that, no, Scrimgeour didn’t intend to do anything—he was much more interested in cleaning up the Aurors than the Wizengamot—and you weren’t a political player. We had to retreat and wait for the right moment. The moment is here, now that you’re Black heir and made an oath to help us.” Loki paused and

looked at Harry expectantly. "We choose our victims carefully," he added. "There will be no shortage of them, since so many people have wronged us, and it was not even seen as wrong at the time."

"How do I know this is true?" Harry asked.

Loki laughed. "My name is Fenrir—Loki," he said, the word apparently forced from him. "I've taken Veritaserum, Harry. I told you, we wanted you to understand. Everything, absolutely everything, that I have told you today is true. We simply won't be ignored any longer. Telling the truth isn't enough, but we thought it could help you listen, once we made you pay attention."

Snape studied the werewolf more closely, seizing another focus to be rid of his terror, and noticed his slightly glazed eyes and the way he stood very straight, keeping himself from listing to one side with an effort. Yes, he had taken Veritaserum.

"Who is your victim for this full moon?" Harry demanded.

"No one," said Loki. "This action was planned instead."

"And for the next?"

"A woman in the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures," said Loki, his eyes never wavering from Harry's. "One of those Umbridge planted during her tenure. Her name's Melissa Rosewood. You will not believe what damage she has done to us, including having a bitten Muggle teenager die 'accidentally' in her care. But, of course, no one cares. You were outraged when harm happened to the Many snakes because of Umbridge's new edicts. You set Tybalt Starrise to digging her out. But you did not care about us."

"I never knew," said Harry.

"Ah," said Loki. "I thought so. This is merely making sure you look." He glanced at the werewolves holding Snape, Moody, and Draco. "Remember this, vates," he said. "We will give you time, now, time to do what you can. We have not even chosen a victim for July. After all,

I fully expect you to protect Melissa Rosewood when June's full moon comes. But if you do nothing to help us, then we will choose new victims."

"I could detain you now," said Harry. His magic was snarling and trembling around him still, Snape saw. "Why not? It would be the most useful course, and no one would blame me, not after the tactics you've used against me."

"You don't want to do that," said Loki softly.

"And why not?"

"Because my packmates will bite those you love if you do anything to harm or capture me, or indeed do anything but wait until I am safely away into the Forest." Loki's eyes flashed. "And because none of us have taken Wolfsbane."

Snape felt his calm wrenched away from him. His muscles tensed. He was going to struggle, wise idea or not. The werewolf holding him snarled again, though, and he found his muscles cramping out of terror, holding him still perforce.

"I see," said Harry after a long moment.

Loki nodded to him, his tongue lolling again. This time, what Snape noticed was the length and sharpness of the teeth the tongue lolled past. "Yes. We have enough time to go home and drink it before the moon rises—barely. But delay us at all, and you will have a pack of maddened werewolves on school grounds. Werewolves I can make invisible, mind, until they are close to their targets."

Harry closed his eyes and stood still. "Go, then."

"I am glad that you've seen sense. I hope you continue to see it," Loki said mildly, and then turned and began to lope away across the grass to the Forest, followed by his pack. Snape watched, since Harry didn't seem inclined to. They never stopped or looked aside. They melted into the trees within a few minutes.

Harry turned and looked at the three werewolves who'd lingered.

The woman holding Snape vanished. Snape stumbled, and then sat down hard. He glanced over, and saw that Elder Gillyflower, the woman on top of Moody, and the man holding Draco had also gone, as suddenly as if they'd Apparated. Harry stood with his eyes wide, his magic visible in the air around him as a bright aura, even through the blue phoenix flame that was slowly crisping his clothes. Then he shook his head in frustration, obviously unable to sense them. The phoenix fire at last died.

That pack magic is terrifying, Snape thought, in an effort to make himself forget that what he had really feared was hot breath in his ear and the suggestion of teeth against his neck.

He looked up to see Harry talking softly with Draco, one arm around his shoulders. Then he turned and hesitated. He wants to see what happened to me, Snape thought, but he is wary of making me look weak in front of Moody.

"I am well," he said quietly.

Harry's gaze was anxious, devouring, but he forced himself to take Snape's word for it, and nodded. Then he turned to Moody, repairing his wooden leg and fixing it back into place. The old Auror was swearing foully enough to cause air pollution, Snape thought.

He looked back at the grass where the werewolves had stood. Only faint depressions in it showed they had ever been there.

Snape took a deep breath, and his fear turned a corner and became black and boiling hatred.

They shall not touch me again, he thought. Never again. And they shall not touch Harry. I will find a way to stop this.

His wandless magic, no longer confined by fear, whirled around him and tore up the grass with invisible claws. Snape still nodded curtly to Harry's concerned gaze, but he indulged his magic with a few more twists and turns and bouts of destruction.

I shall find a way to stop them.

I hate them.

Harry closed his eyes and held himself still. He would explode in rage otherwise, and he couldn't afford that.

Yes, Snape could be angry. Harry had seen how angry he was on his return to the castle. He'd been forced to face his worst fear today, and more than that, he'd seen the creatures of that fear use him to manipulate Harry. It would be strange if he were not furious.

Yes, Draco could be angry, once he got over the fear. He was writing his father right now, and Harry couldn't find a word to say against that. He had never expected to have Lucius Malfoy's support in his fight for werewolves' rights anyway, and though it would be bad to have his active opposition, his truce-dance alliance with Harry would restrict what he could do.

Yes, Moody had been angry, and had furiously put the dueling club through its paces, but that could be a good thing, with Midsummer coming. And they hadn't been too exhausted to pass on good news. Ron had told Harry tonight that he'd written home about the dueling club under Moody, and his family had been impressed enough, either by the account or by the fact that an old Order member had joined Harry, that his brothers Bill and Charlie, both fairly powerful wizards, were now considering coming to Hogwarts to fight on Midsummer.

But Harry was a Lord-level wizard, and if he let go now, with his rage whispering words of blood and hatred inside him like a werewolf's web, then he stood a good chance of destroying the Slytherin common room.

He'd been fighting the anger ever since that afternoon. Blaise had taken one look when he and Draco returned from the dueling club and fled their bedroom. Draco hadn't spoken to Harry, but he lay on his bed and stared at him.

Harry counted his breaths, and tried to think past his fog of absolute dislike for Loki.

I can't let this make me hate all werewolves, or even all werewolves in that pack. They're doing what they think best. They have a reason for choosing their victims, even if it's not a reason I agree with. Loki could have had his pack bite Snape and Draco, it would have been easy, but he didn't. I think he did want to just get my attention and talk with me, and he doesn't really care if I hate him personally, so long as I'm looking more intensely at the Ministry's interactions with werewolves.

But I hate him.

Harry forced down the phoenix fire that wanted to blaze around him. He'd already ruined a good portion of the bench at the Slytherin table and two sets of robes today. He didn't want to set fire to anything else.

But remembering the mixture of loathing and terror that had run through him like fire and acid intertwined when he faced Loki made it difficult. He kept trying to put the emotions in Occlumency pools, and they kept slipping away from him. He kept thinking that he should be able to put aside personal likes and dislikes and just concentrate on the larger political issues, and he kept failing.

"That's enough of that," he heard someone say, and then Draco's arms slipped around him and held him tightly.

"Draco," Harry whispered, feeling the Darkest parts of his magic squeal in glee at the thought of tearing apart warm skin and flesh and muscle. "Don't."

"I'm not frightened of you, Harry," Draco whispered into his ear. "And you have the right to feel what you're feeling. How many times have we told you that?" His voice was half-teasing. "Do you need to go see Vera again?"

"No, I need to see Snape," Harry said. He'd been waiting because he needed to be able to play the role of comforter and sympathetic

listener when he went to Snape's offices, and that meant getting past his own emotions. He hadn't expected them to refuse to go away.

"Not yet," said Draco. "Harry, you can hate them. I wish you hadn't sworn that oath, but you did. I wish you didn't have to help them, but you do—to an extent. That doesn't mean you can't hate their leader personally, and wish to kill him. You're too honorable to start hating Mrs. Parkinson because she has the same curse as that weakling Lupin and that beast Loki. You're going to work around this, and you're going to end this mess, one way or the other."

End it...

And Harry knew what he wanted to do. His breathing eased, and his hatred eased, too, because he could well imagine that the course of action he'd just decided on would be one Loki couldn't accept and yet couldn't argue against without betraying his packmates. The Darker parts of his magic, distracted now, chuckled at the thought of causing an enemy pain.

"Thanks, Draco," he whispered, drawing back with a kiss to Draco's cheek. "You just gave me an idea that made me feel a whole lot better."

Draco sat back and stared at him. "What?"

"I'm going to find a cure for lycanthropy," Harry said. "Not Wolfsbane, but something that actually gets rid of the web. That would put an end to not only the persecution of werewolves, but their ability to say that they have no other options but horrible treatment or violent revolution."

Draco frowned. "Can you do that? You told me the werewolves thought of the webs as living things you wouldn't kill."

"That is why it needs research," said Harry fiercely. "But I am going to figure out some way around this, as you put it, even if the webs are living creatures. This is—I can't just give up helping the werewolves, and I can't tolerate the vulnerability that Loki made me feel today. And it's a much better option than just pushing for the imprisonment

of some werewolves, which would make the banshees in the Ministry think I'm on their side, and the punishment of those who hurt werewolves, which would make Loki think I support him. I'm on my own side."

Draco smiled at him. "Excellent." He gave his shoulder a little push. "You're always at your best when you have a plan. Now go talk to Snape, and then come back so I can give you etiquette lessons to prepare you for the festival."

"I mean it, you know," said Harry, and lingered a moment to touch his cheek. "You were the one who gave me the idea. You have more faith in me than I do in myself. I love you."

Draco blinked a moment, then said, "I hope so, since you're wearing a Black ring. And since I love you, too. Prat. Get going."

Harry grinned at him and trotted out of the room. Draco would be all right. Moody was already all right, veteran of a hundred situations that had damaged him much worse. Snape needed him now. Harry would write a letter to Scrimgeour, telling him about Melissa Rosewood, when that was done.

And after that, he would start helping the werewolves, whether they liked the way he did it or not.

Chapter Eighty-Three: Riddle Me This

Harry waited a week before he tried to approach Snape about the next part of his plan in the Midsummer battle. When he had visited Snape the night of Loki's attack, he'd been in a frightening rage. He'd said a few things that Harry would have thought unforgivable if this was any normal mood, and actually flung a potion that he found less than perfect across the room so that it slammed into the wall, breaking the glass vial and splattering potentially dangerous liquid everywhere. Luckily, his wandless magic had cleaned up the potion even as it fell.

Then, the next few days, Snape had come close to losing his temper when he saw Harry reading books about werewolves. Harry had quietly removed himself from his guardian's line of sight during those days. He couldn't tell if Snape was more upset over the fact that he'd felt such fear or the fact that Loki's pack had used him against Harry, but either way, more time needed to pass before he could come to terms with it, that was clear.

But a week was as long as Harry felt he could wait, and besides, he had received an important letter from Scrimgeour in the meantime. It thanked him for the information about Melissa Rosewood. She'd been arrested and questioned, which had the double effect of punishing her and keeping her safe from werewolf bites behind the thick walls of Tullianum. What Loki said seemed to have been true, beyond that. No new werewolf victims were reported after May's full moon, though of course the Ministry took credit for that, bragging that their new laws intimidated werewolves enough to stay inside on that night instead of running free.

Scrimgeour had actually denied the Wizengamot's notion of confining werewolves in Tullianum. That had caused quite a buzz in the Ministry, but the Daily Prophet was frustratingly short on details, and Scrimgeour hadn't mentioned them in his own letter to Harry, either.

He had confirmed a suspicion Harry had, though, and that was all that Harry needed for this particular plan.

“Sir?” Harry put his head around the door of Snape’s offices. “Are you busy?”

Snape turned sharply away from the cauldron he was working at. Harry saw the liquid inside the cauldron; it shimmered a silvery color and had an unfamiliar smell. Harry’s gut tightened with worry. He remembered how much trouble Snape’s Meleager Potion had caused last year. Generally, when Snape felt inspired to invent potions, the cause was vengeance.

“Sir,” he said again, this time with a different tone in his voice.

Snape closed his eyes for a long moment. Then he opened them and held Harry’s gaze. “I will not send this by owl to any werewolf alive, even Lupin,” he said. “You have my word on that, Harry.” He waved his wand at the cauldron, casting a spell that would hold the potion in its current state. “I am merely creating it in order to make myself feel better. That is all.”

Harry nodded, and forced himself to accept that. Though the potion was silver, the color of the one metal that could truly hurt werewolves, he had to believe him, because Snape had earned that much trust. Only when Harry heard about a werewolf dying of a mysterious disease or poison would he think Snape had actually done something with the potion.

“What did you wish to see me about?” Snape asked, using a forced lightness of tone to carry them past the subject.

Harry hid a grim smile. If Snape had only known, there was no need for that tone. He was going to forget all about his potion in just a moment.

“I need your help to make my mind into a trap for Voldemort,” said Harry casually, and laid his book and Scrimgeour’s letter carefully on the nearby table.

Snape said nothing for a long moment. When Harry looked up, he found those dark eyes pinning him, wide with disbelief. Snape seemed to realize he was showing emotions other than contempt,

and the incredulity vanished in the next moment. He sneered, and said, "And you would come to me for help on this because—you are suffering from delusions and believe that I will actually permit such a thing to happen?"

"It's the best option," said Harry. "I've thought it through. I have to make Voldemort come to Hogwarts on Midsummer Day. Otherwise, he has no reason to do so. He won't try to trap the highest Light the way he did the wild Dark. It'll be watching for that, after the trick he played on it last year. I have to make the trap perfect. And to do that, I need to lure him with knowledge of the full prophecy."

"You will not actually reveal this." Snape's voice was as solid as iron.

"Not the real one, no," said Harry, with a faint smile in his direction. "I'm asking Acies to help me come up with a false one, one that includes just enough truth to make Voldemort believe that I'm the most likely candidate to defeat him, and to have that defeat—or his ultimate victory—come at Hogwarts on Midsummer Day. That'll pull him, sir. That corridor he was dreaming of, with the locked doors? The only ordinary dream of his that I ever shared? I saw a crest on one of the doors the last time I dreamed it, and wrote to Scrimgeour. He confirmed what I saw. That corridor is in the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry. They have a Hall of Prophecy. That's what Voldemort is after, I think, some knowledge of the prophecy that concerns us. He wants it. And he believes in it. If he believes that the prophecy says his stand or fall will happen here, on Midsummer, he'll come."

"And you must use your mind as a trap for that?" Snape leaned back against his desk. "Let the Opalline family be useful, for once. Let them pass the information to those who might pass it on to the Dark Lord."

"I did consider that," Harry said quietly. "I also considered leaking the news around someone who doesn't like me, and who could carry the story to the Daily Prophet. But aside from telling all and sundry that something important is happening at Hogwarts on that day—and Merlin knows, we'd get idiots wanting to watch and idiots wanting to help—Voldemort wouldn't just accept it. He'd break into my mind first

thing, to confirm my knowledge of it. And when he realized I didn't believe in that as the real prophecy, he wouldn't, either."

"And you believe you can fool the Dark Lord." Snape's voice was soft enough that Harry couldn't tell which emotion was most prevalent in it. "The most skilled Legilimens alive."

"With your help," said Harry. "You fooled him for a year, didn't you? So either you're the most skilled Occlumens alive, or at least in Britain, or he's just not good enough to get through your defenses. That's why I need your aid, sir. I'll need shields to make him think I believe the false prophecy and that I don't want him in my mind and am fighting furiously to get him out, and shields to defend me from taking a second tearing the way I did with Tom Riddle."

"And how do you intend to attract his attention in the first place?" Snape asked. "Understand that your response should not include the words 'venture into the Dark Lord's mind' in any combination."

Harry grinned at him. "No, sir." He lifted the book he'd laid down so that Snape could see the title. *Dreaming the Dark: Potions of the Night*.

Snape looked at him levelly. "I would expect some fifteen-year-old students to use that book extensively, Harry," he said. "Not you."

Harry felt his ears turn hot, but he managed to shrug. "It's the modification of the potions I'm interested in," he said.

"Is it."

"Yes." Harry forced himself to straighten and meet his guardian's eyes. "Frankly, I don't need Draco dreaming about me any more than he already does." He flipped through the book. "But I want to modify one of the most common potions in here, so that I dream obsessively enough about the false prophecy to inspire Voldemort to cross the barrier. And when he does, we'll be ready." He met Snape's eyes and waited.

Snape said nothing, and still said nothing, and still said nothing. Harry hid a smile. Snape always did seem to underestimate Harry's patience, not realizing that Harry had had all the patience drummed into him that he could ever wish for by his childhood. He waited, and at last Snape broke.

"You realize this will take an enormous amount of work," Snape said at last. "The modified potion, the Occlumency shields buried in your mind, and a link from your mind to mine, so that I can be awake and ready to bolster your shields in a moment, whenever the Dark Lord chooses to come through the connection."

"I do know that, sir," said Harry softly.

Snape paced back and forth for a moment, his robes trailing behind him, and said, "Much as I hate to admit it, you are right, Harry. I see no other way to lure the Dark Lord into this trap on Midsummer without telling everyone what we are doing." His grimace went from resigned to stern in a moment, and he shot a sharp look at Harry. "But I will prepare every step with you. There will be nothing that you do without my permission and my knowledge."

Harry bowed his head. "That's what I was hoping for, sir. I know that you're a much more accomplished Occlumens than I am, and the last time I had him running loose through my head, he hurt me badly." He shuddered to think of how his mind had felt after his battle with Tom Riddle in second year. "I am only choosing my thoughts for the battlefield because I have no other choice. And now I can tell Draco," he added, feeling himself brighten. "I didn't want to yet, because he'd try to persuade me out of it. When he hears that you've agreed, then he'll be more ready to trust me."

"Why does Draco need to be a part of it?" Snape asked, frowning.

"He doesn't need to, not in the way that you do, sir," Harry said, picking up the book and Scrimgeour's letter. "But I'd like him linked to my mind, so that he can get a closer look at Voldemort's mind and how it works. After all, he'll need to possess him come Midsummer."

"That is the part, of all in this mad plan of yours, that I am the most uneasy about," Snape murmured.

Harry laughed, though he didn't feel much like doing so. "There's a reason that we only told Narcissa about that part, and not Lucius. Draco's mother can accept that he's an adult now, and can make his own decisions like this. Lucius would think he had to protect his heir first and foremost."

"He may be right," Snape said. "Draco may not be ready."

"We won't know for certain if we don't let him practice," said Harry. "And this is the best chance that he'll ever have to practice. I don't think Voldemort will stand tamely around and respond to pleas to let Draco possess him, sir."

Snape said nothing, staring at the wall. Harry had no idea what those dark eyes were seeing; there were plenty of horrible memories that could be candidates, after all. Then Snape nodded abruptly and swirled towards him, moving in a cocoon of robes.

"I will require you to speak one more time with Draco," he said, "to make sure he understands every implication of what he is doing. Then I will aid you in shaping your mind into the kind of trap this requires."

"Thank you, sir," said Harry quietly, and took his leave. Draco was a bit irritated Harry felt the need to ask him if he was sure, until he realized that it was Snape who'd told Harry to ask the question. Then what he mostly felt was nervous relief.

"Snape agreed to help you in this, then?" he asked. Harry, sitting on his own bed across from Draco, nodded.

"He said that you'll be in danger, and of course he's right." Harry leaned forward, staring at him intently. Draco tried not to show how giddy he felt to be the center of Harry's attention, even if Harry wasn't doing it for a romantic reason. "So he wants to make sure you understand we're facing the Dark Lord in my mind, through a series

of Occlumency traps, and that you risk possession yourself, or pain from the battle, or even just his notice and enmity, which is painful enough.” Harry’s hand rubbed absently at the stump of his left wrist. “Do you agree?”

“Of course I do,” said Draco. “It’s the only reason I think your luring him into your mind is a good idea at all, Harry, because I’ll be there and Snape will.”

Harry nodded. “I’m grateful to you both,” he said. “Snape thinks it will take a week to build up the traps in my mind to the point where they stand a good chance of fooling Voldemort. In the meantime, I’m going to brew the potions that will emphasize my dreams, and—“

“Practice etiquette lessons with me,” Draco finished gleefully. “After all, the fifth of June is coming up even faster than Midsummer, Harry.”

Harry blinked, opened his mouth, and then closed it again and shook his head. “Honestly, I forgot,” he said.

Draco stifled irritation. Of course he forgot. Making an impression on purebloods has always been a matter of study for him, not something to take pride in. He covered his feelings with a smile and held out his arm. “There is the way we’ll enter the festival, for example,” he said. “It’s the appropriate gesture for our ages, our sexes, the ritual we’re using, and—“

And then he stopped, and realized that Harry was not the only one who stood a chance of being embarrassed at a festival like this. His embarrassments might be more private, but they would happen.

“What, Draco?” Harry had chosen now to use his hardest stare, it seemed, as if he would pry the answers out of Draco’s head.

“Um,” said Draco, and looked away. “The fact that you have a Muggleborn parent, and I’m pureblood.”

“It implies that you’re doing me a favor by joining with me, doesn’t it?” Harry asked.

Draco sighed. "Yes, it does."

Harry said nothing. When Draco looked back at him, he was shrugging and leaping off the bed. "Well, then," he said, and held out his hand, fingers folded back in almost the right position. It was the one that would be standard for a younger wizard being escorted by an older wizard. "This one?"

"Not quite," said Draco, and busied himself with folding Harry's fingers into the proper position to indicate age and gender, then laying the hand on his arm in such a position that his ring would blaze and announce the ritual. He paused before he moved Harry's hand to his forearm, which would give the signal of their respective blood statuses, and eyed Harry carefully. "You really don't mind?"

Harry gave him a patient look. "I don't mind in that I know I can't change people's beliefs overnight, Draco," he said. "I mind in that I think it's stupid, and I won't act like a lapdog around other wizards just because they're pureblood and I'm not. I appreciate it in that someone else might think my adhering to tradition means that I consider myself inferior, and that I'll do whatever you say just because you're pureblood." Harry smiled, a twisted grin that Draco could get used to seeing more often. "And that will be an advantage, if anyone falls into that trap."

Draco chuckled. "You do realize that all the people at the festival but you will be pureblood?" he asked.

"I wouldn't have expected your father to invite anyone else," said Harry, eyes calm.

Draco took a deep breath. "I—some of them you haven't met before, though it includes the families of some of your allies, and the Bulstrodes and the Parkinsons, of course."

"Get to the point, Draco."

Draco paused. "They won't know what to think of you," he said bluntly. "You're powerful, but you're a halfblood. You won't Declare, but you're willingly binding yourself to a Dark family and entering a room

full of Dark wizards and witches. You have a prophecy declaring that you'll defeat Voldemort, but you're crippled." He looked at Harry's lone hand. "Not everyone is as intelligent as my father, Harry. Some of them will despise you for that alone."

"And I know that," said Harry, sounding mildly impatient now. "I realized long ago that I couldn't control everything another person might think about me, Draco. I can adjust impressions and guide my own behavior, but there could be someone in the crowd with individual notions of what that means which would never even occur to me, and certainly aren't the ones I would wish to promote. The mistake people like your father make is in thinking the façade they present is what everyone else really sees and believes in. It isn't. In fact, that just lends those people who can pretend to believe in the façade an advantage over those presenting it."

Draco frowned at him.

"What?" Harry asked.

"You don't act Slytherin all that often," Draco murmured. "And yet, you're perfectly capable of it."

"I don't see a reason to," Harry said simply. "When it's necessary, then I'll do it. But the rest of the time, I would much rather act like me, and either have others accept me as I am, or conduct bargains and trades on the set of principles that everyone understands." He cocked his head. "There's a reason I haven't Declared, Draco. I'm not committing myself to just one sort of magic, true, because that would be limiting, but I'm not committing myself to one set of methods, either."

Draco felt a bit of his worry ease. Harry was going to do just fine at his festival.

"Now," he said, "when we've entered, then we'll turn to the right and make a crossing of the whole room, so everyone can see you. Be sure to smile—mysteriously. We don't want everyone able to guess what you're feeling on the night when we first appear in public as a future joined couple. And then—"

He stirred, slowly, feeling as though he were awakening from a much deeper sleep than was actually the case. He could feel the images playing in his head, stemming from Harry's mind.

The boy would not stop dreaming.

It was especially tantalizing because Lord Voldemort could feel that the dreams were about a prophecy. He could not catch the words, but he could catch glimpses of light, and the boy's nervous anxiety and excitement. He had only recently figured out the whole of the prophecy, it seemed, and was now hoarding it to himself, trusting Lord Voldemort not to figure it out in time.

But he would. Oh, he would. He was not a hunter for nothing.

He had not touched the long grass that shrouded his connection to the boy's mind since his blinding. He hated the boy too much. He would destroy him if he stepped into his mind. And that could not be, not yet. These things must be done properly. If the boy was a scooped-out hollow shell, and yet still alive, then he might manifest some strange and unknown power.

Lord Voldemort understood much, but not enough, of what had happened in Godric's Hollow the night he had gone hunting the boy. He knew he had made the boy his magical heir. He knew that the rebounded Killing Curse had come from Harry, and not his brother. He knew Harry's Avada Kedavra had struck him in the moment that he was casting his second Killing Curse at Harry's brother; a moment sooner or later, and the twin would have been either unmarked or dead.

But there had to be more to the matter, more than a magical accident, even a bizarre one. Hunters like Lord Voldemort were not taken down by magical accidents. It did not happen.

It was the turn of a prophecy, and he did not know the whole prophecy. He had not, at first, thought it important that he should. He had known that someone born at the end of July was his enemy. That was sufficient, and certain events had proven correctly that Harry was

his chosen foe. But when he woke next to the cup last year after Harry had wounded him and sent him fleeing for his life from the graveyard, he realized, grimly, that there was more to it than that. A chosen foe should not have been able to wound him so badly in a situation where there were no magical accidents to save his life. He should have read the whole prophecy from Harry's mind when he had the chance.

He had not. And now Harry was thinking of the prophecy, and not attending to their connection through his scar, doubtless thinking that Lord Voldemort was too frightened of him to return.

That is not true.

He had a snake to serve as his eyes now. He had Indigena Yaxley researching Falco Parkinson and breeding plants that would dig underground and through solid stone and wards for him. He had his Death Eaters bringing in new recruits every day. He was Lord Voldemort, old and strong, strong, strong!

He parted the long grass that protected the Occlumency connection and stepped through into the maze of Harry's mind.

Snape jerked awake as the mental bond went taut like a bowstring. He closed his eyes and reached along it, and felt Harry whispering to him, under the cover of the first and strongest shield they had built, He's here, sir.

And he was. Snape knew the presence of the Dark Lord in his own mind from three years' worth of it, two of loyalty and one of spying. He had never noticed how foul it was until after he had turned to the Light, and it had only grown fouler since the Dark Lord returned—a consequence, Snape thought, of unicorn blood and the resurrection ritual he had used. He might think he was being subtle, but to one who knew what to look for, his presence was like a fist in the gut.

Dreaming? He asked that of Harry, his attention fixed on his former Lord as he stalked slowly along the pathways of Harry's mind. The dream was playing insistently, and featured triumphant images of Harry landing on sun-soaked grass, waving his hands—for in the

dream he had two—and shouting to everyone that Voldemort was dead.

Yes. They had practiced this, too, Snape sliding careful, thin shields between Harry's dreaming and his conscious brain, enabling him to talk to Snape and Draco along the bonds Snape had established without making it seem as if he were awake—because he wasn't, really.

Good. Snape could feel the gathering power of Voldemort's Legilimency, and knew he would strike out in a moment, trying to rip the truth from Harry. He would see no need to disguise his presence. He would want Harry to fear, to know that his enemy knew his plans and wither in the agony of it. Is Draco ready?

Here, Professor. Draco's voice resounded in the mental "air" between them, deep and steady and determined.

Good. Snape braced himself as the first strike came down. Draco had never seen anything like it.

Oh, he'd been in Harry's mind before, but he hadn't seen it like this, a swirling steel skeleton covered with leaves. There were no webs in sight, unless one counted the Occlumency shields Snape had created. They were everywhere, making the mental world glittering and sharp-edged—though only if one knew they existed. Draco was sure the Dark Lord didn't see the traps, or he would never have come ahead.

The view was so mixed, even so, with every glint of light a trap, every shadow a place where Harry's real thoughts hid, every "open" and "true" image a deceit for Voldemort to think he was grasping a closely-guarded secret. Draco shivered a bit, and then reminded himself that the traps were not intended for him. They were meant to snare Voldemort.

And now he could feel the Dark Lord's mind.

Draco did not think he would have felt drawn to this power, even if he were meeting Voldemort in solid form—he had felt nothing but panic and horror and rage when the Dark Lord took Harry prisoner in the graveyard on Midwinter—but he could see why some purebloods might have followed him. There was a certain edge to that magic that was missing even from Harry's. He had grown powerful again since Harry struck at him in the Chamber of Secrets, and he would do anything to his enemies, a claim Harry couldn't make. Draco supposed a certain kind of wizard might feel that kissing the hem of the Dark Lord's robes and murmuring fawning, sycophantic phrases was worth the feeling that that power could be turned on one's enemies.

It still appalled him to think that his father had once been one of those wizards, though.

The Dark Lord abruptly stopped walking; Draco's eye translated it that way, anyway, although he knew that imagination made up vision, here, and it was far more likely that Voldemort had probably just stopped spreading his Legilimency through Harry's mind. Draco heard laughter, and then a strike came out and down, a sharp blade of thought meant to scrape Harry, send him reeling in pain, and bring memories of the prophecy to the surface.

Draco took a deep breath—or so he imagined—and then jumped along the bond that tied his mind to Harry's.

There was a sense of reeling, dizzy motion from him, too, and he felt Voldemort cry out in fury as he slammed into his mind. This was not at all like possessing Dumbledore. They had both been Lord-level wizards taken by surprise.

But Voldemort had been Dark far longer, and he had no compunction against hurting his opponents. Draco screamed, he was sure he did, as the pressure came down on him and tried to tear him apart. Pain ripped him from his hold on the Dark Lord's thoughts and sent him backwards.

And then Voldemort spoke directly to him, and Draco wondered how Harry stood having that voice in his head.

You dare? You dare to possess me?

Draco felt Voldemort following him, surging along the bond, trying to gain access to his own thoughts. He couldn't allow that, and he built up what protections he could, slipping and diving and dodging as he had with Dumbledore, hoping Harry would "wake up" soon.

And then he did.

Harry waited. It was hard, feeling the foulness creep through and contaminate his mind, knowing that Voldemort would probably hurt either him or Draco, but it was necessary. This wouldn't look completely innocent to his enemy when or if he noticed the bonds that connected Snape and Draco to Harry's mind. Therefore, the second best option was to make it look like a trap that had failed—as if they had tried to keep the knowledge of the false prophecy from Tom Riddle and hadn't been able to.

He moved, though, when he felt Draco's unsuccessful possession attempt and Voldemort following him.

He concentrated, and most of the Occlumency shields in his head pivoted, revealing to Voldemort just how many dark mirrors surrounded him. Or so it would seem. It was only Harry's own shields that moved. The stronger ones, which Snape had created for him, remained immobile.

Voldemort hissed, distracted, as Harry had hoped he would be. And this is what you set to hold me, he said. To baffle me. You are weaker than I thought.

He reached out, a thick tendril of Legilimency that Harry saw as tipped with barbs, seeking to hook up specific memories. Harry hoped Snape would have the sense to keep still, hold the shields in defensive postures, and let Harry take the damage. Even he couldn't face the Dark Lord like this, and if he appeared so suddenly from his hiding place, then Voldemort might suspect the truth.

Harry screamed in pain, as Voldemort wanted, and it did hurt quite a bit as that claw dug downward. He flurried memories in front of Voldemort like butterflies, one of the earliest protective techniques Snape had taught him. They were ripped aside like curtains, of course. Harry had known they would be.

Downward and downward he rolled, luring Voldemort on, pretending to be shocked and frightened that his traps didn't work. Voldemort roared in triumph and then performed a Legilimency technique that Harry hadn't heard of before, which summoned memories of a specific event towards him.

Harry screamed and let it happen. He would have to trust Snape's shields now. They were thickest around his memories of the true prophecies, both the one that supposedly predicted him as the defeater of the Dark Lord and the one that Acies had recited to him. Harry had to hope they were weighted heavily enough not to go flying to Voldemort.

He did try to snatch at one of them, of course, the carefully constructed image of the false prophecy, and Voldemort laughed and called it with a variation of the Summoning Charm, adding insult to injury.

Harry watched as the memory sprang to life, himself leaning close to Acies, as if she were the one who had told him the truth. She nodded to him, her eyes still hidden. Harry had hoped that would make it more mysterious to Voldemort. He did not dare show him that Peter knew the true prophecy.

"What your parents recited to you was not the truth, Harry," she whispered. "There is more to the words that guide your fate."

"More? Are you certain?" Harry's voice in the memory was startled, breathy—not the way he would have really reacted, had this happened, but perfectly in tune with Voldemort's reaction, since he thought prophecies were so important.

"More," said Acies, with a firm nod. "This is the prophecy." She settled back and began to recite.

Harry had gone to some trouble with this bit of doggerel, since he wanted it to be worthy of Trelawney. There was also the fact that Voldemort knew the first few lines of the true prophecy; Snape, in his spying on Dumbledore before he turned to the Light, had carried them to him. Mix truth with impressive-sounding nonsense, and Harry hoped it might pass.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches..." Acies intoned. "Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies..."

That was as much as Voldemort had heard, and what came afterwards was pure fancy, pure invention. Harry didn't think Trelawney herself could have given it the pompous tone that Acies did.

"Born whole, he yet shall become divided," Acies whispered. "In heart and in body, in magic and in soul."

Harry was startled to feel a surge of fear from Voldemort when he heard those words. What is that all about? But he had to keep his startlement buried and his outrage uppermost, to fool Voldemort into thinking it mattered that he could see this memory, so he shoved the thought away.

"He must become divided, to defeat the Dark Lord," Acies said. "And he shall face the one who first divided him and gave his permission for the second dividing on the day of longest light, when the dawns shall blaze and the gryphon shall shine forth in the sky. The divisions of heart and soul shall happen there, and with all four complete, the one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord shall come down with the weapon of the eagle and tear him apart in front of the eagle's last roosting place. O guard him, O shield him, for he must be divided ere the world be made whole—and only on that day of light and division may he be divided, or killed in his half-wholeness."

Harry in the memory bowed his head and sighed. "Wow," he whispered.

Harry, crouched under his Occlumency shields, could feel Voldemort's mind working purposefully, and knew what conclusions he would be coming to. A storm of the Light was coming, and the Light's symbol was a gryphon. Ravenclaw's House symbol was an eagle, and it was common knowledge, or at least a common legend, that Rowena Ravenclaw had come back to Hogwarts to die. Everything would point towards the fatal day being this Midsummer, in front of Hogwarts, and Harry killing Voldemort with some weapon of Ravenclaw's.

And, of course, Voldemort had split Harry's magic in making Harry his magical heir, and divided his body in giving permission for Bellatrix to cut off his hand. But the wording of the prophecy suggested there was a chance to kill Harry before the other two divisions happened—though only on Midsummer.

Harry felt the moment when the Dark Lord made his decision, and laughed aloud. You have not kept this from me, he hissed in Harry's head, his voice vibrating like a snake. You will lose.

Harry let out a cry of loss and rage, but he wanted to sob with relief, though even that emotion got tucked away beneath Snape's shields at once. It had worked.

Voldemort laughed again, and vanished from Harry's head, sealing the Occlumency connection between them so that Harry couldn't follow.

Harry swam towards the surface of his mind at once, wanting to see how Draco felt.

Draco felt bloody horrible, that was how he felt.

He'd barely opened his eyes—he was lying on his own bed, since the Dark Lord's attack had come in the middle of the night, exactly as Harry predicted it would—when Professor Snape came into the room like wrath embodied and hissed at him, "Do you have any idea what you risked, you stupid boy?"

Draco found himself responding not as a comrade-in-arms, though Snape had treated him that way when they were planning this trap, but as a Slytherin student facing his Head of House. He lowered his eyes and ventured, "Sir, I was supposed to practice—"

Snape cast a Silencing Charm before Draco could finish, blocking their conversation from a curious, sleepy Blaise, who'd poked his head out of his own curtains. "Yes, you were supposed to practice possession," Snape whisper-hissed, "while the Dark Lord was occupied with the false prophecy, you stupid boy, and not before he had even started to fall into the trap! You could have revealed my own presence. You certainly made Harry move earlier than he had planned. And you could have been killed or possessed yourself."

Draco winced and shut his eyes. His head pounded furiously, as though someone had tried squeezing his brain through a funnel. "I'm sorry, sir," he murmured, and rested his head in his hands. "Can I get a headache potion?"

"I should withhold it from you," Snape hissed, "to teach you what happens to spoiled little boys who disobey." But his hands were already moving, pulling a vial from his pocket and holding it out to Draco. Draco downed it, and was relieved to feel the pain diminish, though only by half.

"The rest of the damage is mental," said Snape, and seized his chin, holding him roughly still. "A skilled Occlumens must fix it."

He dived into Draco's mind with what didn't feel like skill, rearranging his memories in what Draco supposed was the correct order, pulling and tugging at the edge of what felt like gaping holes, and once causing images of the house elves cleaning the Manor to flash in front of Draco's eyes. Draco supposed that was analogous to taking out the foulness that contact with Voldemort must have left.

Snape let go of his chin and looked away from him, and Draco sighed. His head still hurt, but it was the memory of the pain that hurt more, and how he had reacted to the notion that Voldemort was about to hurt Harry. He had lunged into danger like a brainless Gryffindor.

“Draco?”

He turned his head, and saw Harry climbing off the bed and coming towards him. Draco assumed a pathetic expression that he wouldn't have dared try with only Snape there, and heard his Head of House stifle a growl as Harry gently stroked Draco's hair and then took his chin in a far gentler grip than Snape had managed.

“All right?” Harry whispered.

“I will be,” Draco said, and then aired what had bothered him most, after the pain. “I couldn't possess him, Harry. I don't know how I can accomplish what we have to on Midsummer Day.”

“We'll go on training,” Harry promised. “We'll find a way, Draco. And if worst comes to worst, then I have another idea.”

“Why didn't you say so?” Draco demanded. He'd been sure that everything depended on his possessing Voldemort.

“Because I don't know if it will work,” said Harry, with a slight frown. “I don't know if you can possess objects, even ones that have at least a partial self-awareness. We'll practice, though.” He stepped back and looked up at Snape. “How did I do, sir?”

“Look me in the eye.”

Harry complied, and Draco watched Snape anxiously; Harry had planned to take some damage, of course, to convince Voldemort that he'd resisted the abduction of the prophecy memory as well as he could, but that didn't mean this was good. Snape studied Harry's eyes for a moment, then nodded, the smallest amount of relaxation appearing in his face. “The wounds are healable, Harry.”

“Good,” said Harry. “I'll get to healing them. If you'll end the bonds you and Draco have with me, sir?”

Snape cast a quick, efficient spell, and Draco sighed as the greater sense of connection he'd experienced to Harry in the past few days

fell away. Then he lost the sigh as Harry flung his arms around him and embraced him.

“You were brilliant, Draco,” Harry murmured into his shoulder. “I think you convinced him that this was a trap that failed even more than I did. Thank you.”

Draco beamed, and quite carefully did not look at his Head of House, whom he was sure would not be as approving. “Thank you, Harry,” he said, and leaned into the embrace, soaking up the accolades of faith and belief that he no doubt deserved.

Lord Voldemort opened his eyes—or, rather, he linked his consciousness to the mind of his snake once more. The young flesh-serpent crawled over to his throne and stared up at his face, letting him see the joy that twisted it. It was an odd experience, looking at one’s own features, but he had quickly grown used to it. All attempts to bring back his own eyes had been in vain.

I have the prophecy. I know what will happen. And it is essential that it be prevented.

Even apart from the prophecy, Lord Voldemort would not permit someone else to divide his soul as he had done. That was his own sacred and protective art of immortality. But it was what would happen if he could not kill Harry in time. And he could do that on only one day and in only one place.

On Midsummer Day, I go to Hogwarts.

Chapter Eighty-Four: Midsummer Breathing Down Their Necks

“Then begin,” the woman from the Wizarding Examinations Authority said, and leaned back as if that were the conclusion of her task. Harry could see her eyes, however, alert and confident beneath half-lowered lids. She would be watching, and anyone who thought himself able to get away with cheating in the Potions Practical because of her sleepiness would be sadly mistaken.

Harry took a deep breath and began to mix the Draught of Peace. The powdered moonstone slipped between his fingers like sand, and he reminded himself that his hand had no reason to shake. He’d already asked for and received permission to use a Levitation Charm as a second hand. The proctor had added alarms to alert her if he used any magic that would speed the cooling of the potion or interfere with another student’s work, which Harry thought entirely fair.

He cleared his mind, carefully, of all thoughts of the future, all thoughts of the coming battle, all thoughts of whether he would even have a future in which the Potions OWL he earned might matter. He dropped straight into the sea of calm that let him brew his best potions. If he could maintain this state when he was mixing experimental ones, he thought as his magic skimmed the syrup of hellebore towards him so he could examine its consistency, then he might achieve more with them. But there, he was always enthusiastic, more eager to see the end result than in evaluating how best to get there, and he made frequent mistakes.

He started mixing the Draught of Peace, quietly certain that he would produce a good potion.

“They’re—beautiful.”

Harry grinned over his shoulder. He had never thought he would live to hear Zacharias Smith stunned.

“Aren’t they?” he asked happily, and bowed to the horse in the lead. It studied him for a moment, then dipped its head back and let him step nearer so that he could stroke its neck. Laura had told him that the Gloryflowers had created these horses on the model of hippogriffs,

partially to stop an enemy simply seizing a riderless one in a battle and mounting it. They would not accept anyone who hadn't bowed in polite introduction beforehand.

The horses were all made of gold, or more precisely, Harry thought, gold-colored metal, stamping and shifting and snorting like the real thing. Their hooves, crafted of silver, rang softly on the floor of the Room of Requirement. Their nostrils flared, and they turned their heads rapidly towards new sounds, their ears flagging up and down like banners. Harry hadn't decided what their pale manes and tails were made of yet. Braided diamonds, it looked like, but couldn't be.

They didn't look exactly like real horses—for one thing, no real horses had necks that swan-like or legs that long and loping, built like a cheetah's, for speed—but they were close enough to make the riders whom Zacharias had gathered stare at them in clear longing. Harry stepped back with a little nod. "You're welcome to them," he said. "You'll need to bow and wait for them to bow back before you can ride them, though."

The first person to move forward wasn't one of the Light wizards Zacharias had found, though, but a sixth-year Slytherin prefect, Catrina Flint-Digsby, the one who had laughed when Marietta Edgecombe was still in the hospital wing. She walked straight to the horse Harry had already convinced to accept him, and bowed in turn, murmuring her name. The horse eyed her back. Harry held his breath. He didn't think Laura would have done anything against her magical animals accepting Dark riders, but since the Gloryflowers were a Light family, they might have introduced precautions into the model that they'd forgotten to tell Harry about.

The horse snorted in recognition a moment later, though, and let Catrina come near enough to stroke its neck. She beamed, and then clucked her tongue and asked, "Kneel for me?"

The horse dropped to its knees. Catrina flung an easy leg over its back, sitting in the saddle-like dip there with the posture of an experienced rider, and only then paused and said, "Where are the reins, Harry?"

Harry pointed. "Under the mane. They're attached to the horse itself. Bit already in the mouth, reins leading out from it. If you can't figure out the proper signals to give it, since it is different from a real horse, Laura Gloryflower assured me they respond to verbal commands."

Catrina nodded, looking a little less confident, and picked up the reins. When she slapped them against the horse's neck, it stood, and when she pulled them and used her legs and knees in signals incomprehensible to Harry, the golden creature began first to trot and then to canter in a circle around the Room of Requirement.

Harry smiled as he watched. The horse shone as it ran, and that was only in the muted lights of the Room's makeshift riding ring. He couldn't imagine how they would shine on Midsummer Day itself, when the storm of the Light would reach down to the Light's creatures.

"They don't get tired, and they don't get hungry," he told the other riders, who were pressing forward eagerly now. "And they'll do almost anything you can think of if you use the reins or give them a verbal command, including behavior that's not natural for horses."

"This is wonderful," said Cho, smiling at Harry around the neck of her own horse, which had accepted her with hardly a pause. "I never imagined I would have the chance to participate in a battle like this."

Harry smiled back at her, and tried to conceal his worry. Cho's parents had agreed to her being here, and she owed him a life debt anyway. All the riders were older, none below fifth year, and several were legal adults. All had chosen to stay and risk their lives.

Harry still wasn't entirely happy about having adolescents other than Draco fighting in the battle, though.

He managed to calm down as he thought of the three other creatures Laura had sent. One was more properly many small creatures, a hive of digging bugs that would patrol the grounds just beneath the surface of the soil, and, hopefully, stop any of Indigena Yaxley's plants that were trying to root in it. Harry had to take them out and introduce them to the plants that belonged in Hogwarts, soon, so that they wouldn't harm the ones that had a right to be there.

The other two were the “prototypes” Laura had mentioned to him. Harry could see why she hadn’t built many of them. They were disturbing. But they would get him and Draco to where they needed to go on Midsummer evening, and that was all he could ask for.

He had to turn around and snicker when Zacharias didn’t wait a sufficient period of time for his horse to accept him and almost got kicked, though. He had to.

“Begin.”

Harry eyed the snail in front of him and took a deep breath. He had plenty of practice with Vanishing things when he could just use his wandless magic; focus and will were the important components there. For the Transfiguration Practical, though, he had to use his wand, and he already knew he should have practiced more. The length of cypress felt unfamiliar and uncertain in his hand.

But he had practiced this in McGonagall’s class—though not as much he should have—and he knew he could do it. He pointed his wand at the snail and concentrated on intoning the Vanishing Spell. This was only the first part of the Transfiguration OWL. He could and would pass it, if only because the harder parts were coming up.

The snail Vanished obediently. The proctor nodded to him and wrote something down on his chart, then pushed a teacup in front of Harry. “Make this into a dove, Harry,” he said encouragingly. He was the first of those from the Wizarding Examinations Authority who didn’t look as if he’d bitten into a raw lemon when asked to call Harry by something other than a last name.

Harry took another deep breath. The days when he’d done this spell with McGonagall watching him and Hermione achieving success in the background—first in the class, of course—seemed very far away. But he remembered the incantation, and spoke it confidently enough. “Pocillum transformo columbae!”

The teacup shuddered and grew wings, the part of the change Harry had always found hardest, and the one on which he’d been

concentrating the most. The rounded portion of the cup turned into a rounded body, and Harry held his breath as the handle became a delicate neck and head. The dove looked up at him and cooed as though asking whether it could have food.

The proctor picked it up and gently turned it around. Then he smiled sympathetically, and showed Harry that the body was still hollow on the underside, the dove missing its feet. This didn't seem to distress the dove at all, which kept cooing and looking around the Great Hall.

Harry felt his face flush in embarrassment. The proctor merely wrote down something on his list and turned around to retrieve a needle for Harry to Transfigure into a goldfish.

"I've tightened the wards," McGonagall told Harry, as she poured tea into cups for them both. "After some searching, Helga helped me find what I'd been missing. Loki could pass through the Forbidden Forest because he had no hostile intentions towards the school. He could have had hostile intentions towards an individual person within it, like you or Professor Snape, and the wards would not have kept him out. We made the wards too focused on Hogwarts as a collective entity." McGonagall sighed and sipped at her tea. "I am sorry this happened, Harry. You cannot know how sorry."

"It wasn't your fault," Harry said quietly, and then hesitated as he sat back with the teacup warming his hand. He hadn't asked her for details before, but now curiosity burned and ate at him. "Headmistress," he said finally, and McGonagall looked up from contemplating eternity in the depths of her teacup. "What exactly did Remus say to you, the day that he left?"

McGonagall's mouth tightened. "He argued that surely he deserved some trust, since I had known him for so long," she muttered, and Harry could see the glint of anger in her eyes. "He was a Gryffindor, one of my own students, and someone I chose to hire even though I knew the laws against werewolf employment. I'd defied the Ministry for him. How could I force him away now, when that would send an unfortunate message to both the Ministry and the werewolves?"

Harry frowned. He didn't like the arguments himself, but he could see why they would have persuaded McGonagall. "Why didn't they work?" he asked aloud, then realized he hadn't meant to ask the question that way. McGonagall waved him off when he tried to apologize, however.

"I asked him, in several ways, what he intended," said McGonagall. "Each time, he told me that he could not reveal anything of Loki's plans or his own, that it was involved in aspects of werewolf life no ordinary wizard could understand, and which he would desecrate if he tried to explain. He wanted me to trust him for trust alone. Finally, I asked him, bluntly, whether he would bite a student if Loki told him to, whether the students were actually safe with him here on full moon nights—not safe in the sense that he would not take Wolfsbane, but safe in the sense that he would not go prowling, fully in control of his actions, and bite someone who didn't want to be bitten."

Harry swallowed. "And what did he say?"

"He couldn't answer me." McGonagall smiled bitterly. "He mumbled something else about pack magic and werewolf life, but he would not guarantee me that my students were absolutely safe. I sacked him at once."

Harry felt a more bitter burn of betrayal than he had when Remus actually left. Once, Remus would have understood how deep a violation of free will that was, to bite someone who didn't want to be bitten. Even if he had accepted his curse now, he had suffered under it for a long time; Fenrir Greyback had bitten Remus because Remus's father had offended him. It had been a punishment for his family, and a horrible heaping of injustice on the head of a young boy who couldn't have influenced his father's actions one way or the other. Now Remus was proposing to do the same thing, and he would not even explain why.

Harry wondered what would have happened if Loki had ordered Remus to bite someone in the school. Would he have done it and still expected to retain his position as Head of Gryffindor House, because that was just "what had to be done?"

His cup abruptly shattered, and he looked down in surprise as hot tea dripped across his fingers, mingling with shards of porcelain. "Sorry," he murmured to McGonagall, and Vanished them.

"It's all right," said McGonagall. "I had a hard time refraining from Transfiguring him into a cushion and sending him to the Hufflepuff common room."

Harry smiled, but in his mind, he carefully checked Remus off any possible list of allies. He still loved him, but he could not trust him.

Binns is useless, Harry thought, frowning at his History of Magic written exam.

The old ghost drawled on and on about goblin rebellions, and almost nothing interesting. The questions on the exam, of course, concerned much more than goblin rebellions. There were questions on wizard-giant relationships, when the Ministry of Magic had first formed, who certain famous wizards and witches were, and details of the First War with Voldemort, to name just a few. Harry idly wondered if the people who'd written the exam had ever thought themselves ridiculous as they carefully scribed out "You-Know-Who."

Luckily, his own reading in history as a child let him know some of the questions, and with others, he had heard that brilliant if madly irrelevant details could often distract the examiners; they would accept a load of bollocks if it was an intelligent-sounding load of bollocks. He'd see what adding obscure ideas about giants would do to distract them from the dates.

With a will, he set to work.

Harry eyed the letter he'd received with trepidation. He'd put off reading it until everything else he could possibly do was done. And even now, he didn't like the fact that it bore the seal of Griffinsnest. He knew who it would be from. He sighed and split the seal.

To his surprise, the letter began with a polite salutation, and contained more emotions than the scolding tone he'd expected.

May 22nd, 1996

Dear Harry:

You may be startled to receive such a letter from me, given that the issue of the linchpins has been settled between you and my family. It is true that I have no control of the Griffinsnest linchpins when working against my family combined. They agreed at the equinox meeting to allow you to attach our linchpins to magic instead of the earth, and I must abide by that decision.

But I can make your life difficult. As you probably know by now, werewolves killed both my parents. Both were killings by 'accepted' werewolves, which is the term I use to refer to lycanthropes who either willingly took the bite or have grown accustomed to the curse in the years since. Both did it as part of an obscure ritual held in some organized packs, known as the Grand Hunt. The object is to go after difficult targets—fully-trained wizards, in this case—and prove how superior their curse renders them. They did not have Wolfsbane, of course, so they made sure they were in the vicinity of my parents when the transformation and the rage took them.

I caught both monsters in wizard form. I challenged them to the same duel that Augustus Starrise used on Adalrico Bulstrode, so that they had no choice but to face me. I finished each of them by driving a silver knife into their hearts in the confines of the duel. So, while they killed my parents in accordance with their own rituals, I killed them in accordance with customs accepted by wizarding society for centuries.

That is the reason I am unable to object to your transference of the linchpins, however repugnant I find your politics. You honored the duel Starrise called, when I know that you could have interfered. You would have honored the way I slew the murderers of my parents. There is a wizard within you whom I wish to work with, one who forgoes vengeance for himself but will not twist the minds of others so that they also forego it.

But I know that werewolves run by your side, and I hear now that you are starting to fight for them more prominently. I have contacts in the Ministry who assure me that one pack of accepted werewolves is bragging they have you under control, despite the biting of Elder Gillyflower. I am sorry, but I cannot stand beside one who bows to monsters like the ones who killed my parents, who indulges them despite their vicious and violent tactics.

I am writing you because I wish to know the truth, and I trust you to answer me honestly. Do you bow to such werewolves? If you do, then I am your sworn foe from that moment forward. If you do not, then I may be able to help you.

Yours in the Light,

Gloriana Griffinsnest.

Harry sat back and frowned for a moment. He wondered if he really should tell her what he planned, then shrugged. If nothing else, she was not going to be the one to expose his tactics to Loki's pack.

And he could feel the boiling anger beginning to surge in him at the mere thought that Loki was bragging about having him under control. Didn't the idiot see that would only hurt his own cause, in at least two ways? Others would refuse to trust Harry as an independent political power, taking him no more seriously than they'd taken Cornelius Fudge, and would probably be extremely reluctant to help him fight for werewolves' rights. And other groups might think they could seize control of Harry by use of the same tactics, or even that they had to, to counter Loki's influence.

But then, Harry thought, as he pulled out parchment to draft his response to Gloriana, leaning on his Defense Against the Dark Arts textbook, I do not give Loki much credit for intelligence. Determination, yes. But it's no wonder that he spun this contest into violence as soon as he could, and threatened me to make me pay attention to him. Violence is all he truly understands.

When his letter was finished, Harry sat back and read it over before he sent it off with Hedwig.

Dear Mrs. Griffinsnest:

I thank you for writing me instead of simply assuming that the rumors you hear about me are true. There has been too much of that lately, and in fact it is the cause of the trouble in the Ministry.

I am under the control of no werewolf pack. Loki, the leader who claims that it is so, has threatened me with infection for people I love if I do not do as he wishes, and also promised to bite someone on the full moon of each month. The biting of Elder Gillyflower in April was only the first such attack. Elder Gillyflower was guilty of crimes against werewolves, and so was their target for June—who is now under the Ministry's protection and prosecution—but there is no telling whether they might not turn to biting innocents in time.

I do not care more for werewolves' rights than the rights of ordinary wizards and witches, or other magical creatures, and that is where Loki has made his mistake. I care for them equally. To be truly under his control, I would have to be convinced that he was right. I am not, and that will bite him in the end.

I have a plan that is two-pronged. The first is working on a cure for lycanthropy. Loki dares to imply that he speaks for all werewolves in threatening me. That is not true. At most, to use your terms, he speaks for accepted werewolves, and not those who hate and resist their curse. I wish to have a cure on hand so that those werewolves who wish to be free of the curse can, and to show that Loki's claims are false.

The second part of the plan does involve fighting for werewolves' rights, yes. I will understand if you can no longer give me the time of day once you read this. However, ma'am, consider this: When all laws are fair, when all rights of werewolves and wizards are equal, then werewolves will be protected far more than they are now. They will be able to have jobs and custody of their own children.

And they will be tried and sent to prison under the same laws. If Loki continues his course, then, once the laws are fair, he can be arrested and tried for use of Dark magic and war crimes. I will see him in

Tullianum someday—not because he is a werewolf, not even because he threatened those I love or manipulated me, but because that is what would happen to a non-werewolf wizard using these same tactics.

I wish to end the endless cycle of vengeance. I enjoy wizard duels no more than Grand Hunts. It is your choice, however, if you wish to help me, beyond allowing the linchpin plan to proceed.

Yours sincerely,

Harry.

Harry nodded, and stood to walk to the Owlery.

“Protego!” Harry could have done this in his sleep. Without doubt, his Defense Against the Dark Arts practical was the easiest so far.

The curse coming at him from the box that the proctor had enchanted to cast random spells bounced; the proctor had to duck as it whizzed past her head. She stood again and smiled at him, writing something down on the chart that she held.

“Excellent, Mr. Pot—Harry.” She peered at him inquiringly. “What would you do if you could not use a shield that bounced back the curses, for fear of hitting your comrades in battle?”

Harry grinned at her and held up his hand, dropping the Protego. The next curse out of the box was a nasty one, meant to burn the skin so badly that normal healing spells would simply slide off it and leave the person writhing in pain. Harry knew it wouldn’t have come out of the box if the proctor didn’t think him able to handle it; the boxes adjusted themselves depending on the skill level of the student being examined.

“Haurio!” he called, and the jade-green shield formed around his hand, spreading out from his wand. The curse hit the shield, which ate it calmly. Harry turned an inquiring gaze on the proctor. “Like that, Madam?”

"Yes, exactly!" She seemed almost flustered as she scribbled, and Harry wondered if the rest of the examinations had been boring so far. He almost hoped so. He was enjoying this, and he'd like to secure at least one O.

"Well?" Harry asked, as Draco sat back and blinked at nothing. The rune circle around the bed shone frantically, as if Draco's venture into possession this time had agitated it. "How was that?"

"Very definitely—strange," said Draco, and ducked his head as if trying to escape Harry's gaze. "You're right. Possessing an object, even one that's self-aware like that one, is very different from possessing a human brain. For one thing, she has a very strong sense of herself as female, but no name. The people I possessed always knew who they were. There's one part of your mind that sings your name over and over. She doesn't see why she needs one."

Harry nodded and laid the Midsummer knife down on the bed. The Light blade glinted in protest, but subsided the moment his hand was no longer touching it. "Do you think you could make it float or stab if you had to?"

"It won't be easy." Draco locked his hands behind his head as he thought about it. Harry told himself to stop staring at Draco's fingers and having random thoughts about them. "But easier than possessing the Dark Lord, I think. Yes, I can."

"Thank Merlin." Harry smiled at him and changed the subject from battle. They'd been practicing this for hours, and Draco's head had to be ringing with worry over what would happen when Midsummer actually arrived. "How are your OWLs coming?"

Draco gave a shaky groan and moved his hands in front of his face. "Terrible!" he wailed.

"Draco," Harry chided him.

"All right, all right," Draco muttered. "Defense Against the Dark Arts and Potions weren't bad. But I couldn't make sense of the History of Magic exam. I should know better than that, shouldn't I? I had parents

who gave me a good education in it. And then I stare at a list of dates and find out I don't know anything."

Harry laughed. "I know the feeling. They really should hire someone other than Binns. Of course, I'm not sure that he wouldn't show up in the History classroom and natter on and on even if they did."

Draco sighed. "Don't remind me. It didn't help knowing that even if I'd stayed awake in that class, it wouldn't have helped." He brooded for a moment, then brightened as he added, "But I've revised so much for my Charms practical that I'm mouthing the incantations in my sleep. That's got to count for something, right?"

"Well, let's see." Harry turned so that he faced Draco fully. "Get your wand, and I'll practice with you."

"That is—bright enough, I think." The proctor had one hand shielding his eyes.

"Sorry, sir," said Harry, abashed. He looked down at the rat he'd been supposed to turn purple with the Color Change Charm. It had worked, but Harry wasn't accustomed to using his wand for this, either, and he'd turned the rat such a brilliant purple that it looked like the sun was glowing from inside it. He shielded his own eyes as the proctor murmured a few cross-sounding words and managed to reduce the rat's color.

"I'd say that you don't know your own strength," said the wizard, with a faint frown at him. He'd seemed either intimidated by or outright afraid of Harry throughout most of the practical, but this time adopted a fatherly tone. "Best to get a handle on that before you try any Charms work in the field, son."

"I know," Harry apologetically, as he readied himself for the next Charm. "Usually, I just do it wandlessly."

The proctor choked, and turned green.

"What do you say, Harry?"

Harry eyed Moody calculatingly. The old Auror had told him to stay behind when he'd dismissed the dueling club, and Harry had, once the usual complement of wounds, bumps, and bruises from Moody's intensive training were healed, and the rest of the students had staggered out the door, moaning. Harry had thought Moody wanted, once again, to express his doubts about the members of the club actually fighting in the battle. He hadn't expected this.

"You're offering me a duel?" he asked Moody.

"Yes." Moody grinned wolfishly as he pulled out his wand. "You don't get a chance to have a proper one often, do you, boy? It's charging about and wandless magic this and draining Voldemort that. But even if your purpose is going to be just to fend him off on Midsummer—" Moody sounded as if he had his doubts of that "—you should still have some dueling instruction."

"I thought that was what you were giving me with the others," Harry protested.

"Have to hold myself to their pace there, don't I?" Moody was prowling in a circle that made Harry instinctively want to fall into a defensive crouch. "Don't dare use some of the spells I could, just in case they get badly hurt and go wailing to their parents about the mad old Auror." He tilted his head to the side, and his grin widened. "You can take it, though, boy. Know you can."

"All right," said Harry. "Wand, or not?"

"Will you use one when you're fighting?"

"Probably not," Harry had to admit. He concentrated on Moody's circling, and waited.

Moody's first spell was non-verbal, of course, a curse that exploded a few inches from Harry and tried to shower him with purple light he knew he didn't want touching his bare skin. Harry rolled swiftly backwards; this was one of those curses, like the Blood Whip, that would make shields explode. He had to put some distance between himself and it.

Moody conjured a wind that blew the purple flakes after him. Harry continued his rolling, until he knew he would fetch up against the far wall of the classroom if he kept moving. He tucked his knees beneath his body and called up a contrary gust of wind. It scattered the purple flakes harmlessly to the ground and drove at Moody, actually spinning him a step backward before he conjured a shield. His wooden leg clicked on the floor with a satisfying sound.

Moody was laughing, and called, "That's why you can lose duels, boy, because you turn to offensive magic too late, and defensive magic too often!" He used a wave of his hand to make Harry think he was throwing a curse that could be stopped by a Haurio, and Harry actually had the green shield surrounding his hand before he realized Moody had fooled him. The curse coming at him was the Blood Whip.

Harry turned his back and took the pain, hissing as it carved lines into his skin, while he reached for a spell he thought Moody wouldn't suspect. "Teredo," he whispered.

That would probably take a few minutes to take effect, so in the meantime he had wounds on his back that limited his mobility, a fully-armed opponent stalking towards him, and the need to use offensive magic—though since it wasn't a real duel, he had to hold back, or he could easily kill Moody.

He concentrated on something that would show he was trying while also being something Moody could defeat easily, and conjured a whirling cyclone of diamond blades, which swept over his shoulders and towards Moody. Harry turned to see what the old Auror would do.

Moody's wand moved impossibly fast as he conjured half a dozen small shields in the air, blocking the blades. Then he grunted at Harry, said, "Another lesson you have to learn is to prepare your next spell instead of watching your enemy," and clenched his hand in no spell gesture Harry knew.

A time-delayed spell, he realized a moment later, as bursts of light in front of his eyes blinded him; Moody had spoken two incantations, one for this spell, the second to keep it waiting until he made the

hand gesture. Well, it had been a good move. Harry couldn't see anything but burning afterimages when he opened his eyes.

Harry decided to stop worrying about hurting the Auror. He obviously had no worry about hurting Harry.

"Sectumsemptra!" he called, and threw his hand over his shoulder towards the place where Moody had last been.

Moody cursed creatively. From the thump of his leg, Harry knew he'd dodged the curse. "What was that, boy?" he demanded.

A spell Snape invented, no wonder you've never seen it before, Harry wanted to say, but decided to hit Moody with quick spells instead, ones that would keep him moving.

"Ventus! Ardesco! Solem adversum intueri! Serpensortia!"

He heard the snake conjured at the end of that spell hiss inquiringly at him, asking him what he wanted it to do, and Harry hissed back, "Bite the old man."

There was the scrape of scales against stone, and Moody cursing from having to dodge wind and flame and blinding light and now a snake all at once, and then an abrupt crack and Moody's, "You can't actually call it off, can you?"

Harry turned around, forcing his eyes open, blinking. The bursts of purple across his vision had just started to fade, but now he could see the thin, dark line of a king cobra making for Moody, who was sprawled on the floor, his wooden leg broken. The fall had sent his wand reeling from his hand.

"Of course I can," said Harry, and told the snake, "Thank you. I don't need any more work from you."

The cobra twisted to look at him. "I'm hungry," it hissed.

Harry sighed and held out his arm. The cobra slithered rapidly across the floor and up his arm, understanding the invitation. "I'll take you to

get something to eat and then set you free,” Harry told it. He glanced back at Moody, who’d been inching towards his wand. Harry called it with a Summoning Charm, and grinned. “Do you know what Charm I used on your leg, sir?”

“Looks like Teredo, from the way the wood’s gnawed,” Moody growled. “Well. You’ll do, boy. Eventually. Got to get you to abandon the defensive and go on the offensive sooner, and not pause to watch the pretty lights. Or the snakes, for that matter,” he added, as the king cobra nudged its head insistently at Harry’s hand, wanting warmth and food. Its body dangled down Harry’s arm and shoulders, then wound around his waist, a good eighteen feet of scale and muscle. “Still. Not bad for a beginner.”

Harry narrowed his eyes in thought. He’d scribbled down every fact about Saturn’s rings that he could remember, and he still wasn’t sure if it was enough for the written portion of the Astronomy OWL.

Draco, of course, would be smug. He’d learned more than enough star-lore when he was a child, thanks to his mother’s heritage, and he was probably finished already, or putting the last touches on a perfect essay. Harry shook his head and told himself to think about Saturn instead of Draco’s smile.

It didn’t help that he’d never been interested in the stars, at least not the way that centaurs and Professor Sinistra were. If star-lore had been a condition of gathering allies, he would have learned it, and likewise if magic concerning the heavens had been the kind he needed to learn to defend himself. But neither was true. Star-lore was really most useful for predicting the future and learning about history, not day-to-day survival in a war. Harry had always placed the knowledge that would let him survive, once to protect his brother and then to defeat Voldemort, first in his mind, above all other kinds.

He decided to write down what he could about Saturn’s position at this time of year. Merlin knew he remembered that, from all the dawns lately that he’d stood on the North Tower and stared towards the east, awaiting Midsummer and its storm.

“He had no right to do it.”

Harry sighed and leaned back against his chair. He and Peter were sitting in a room on the fifth floor that most people avoided, since Peeves tended to haunt it. Peter had performed a complicated curse that Harry had never heard of, which caused an image of the Bloody Baron to float in the air. Peeves took one look and fled, shrieking. Peter had admitted, when Harry pressed him, that he'd been the one Gryffindor House usually assigned to get rid of the poltergeist when they were still in school, and make sure he didn't interfere with any of the Marauders' plans.

Peter had Transfigured several of the broken chairs into whole ones, with a skill Harry envied but supposed he should expect from a wizard who had mastered the Animagus transformation by the time he was sixteen, and connected the room's hearth to the school's Floo network in moments. From there, it'd been a simple matter for him to call down to the kitchens and ask a house elf to prepare tea. And then they had sipped it and talked as Harry told him, in detail, about Remus. Peter had come to the school to help prepare for the battle; without Regulus, he was lonely in the Black houses.

Peter had listened to the story of Remus, without interrupting, and then made his strange declaration. Harry felt a knot of tension at the base of his spine uncoil. He had expected Peter to take Remus's side, really, since they were such old friends.

"I can understand why he did it," Harry said, striving to keep his tone neutral. "He had his sense of belonging stripped away from him again and again—first when he was bitten, and then when you got sent to Azkaban. And then, even when you showed that you weren't a sacrifice anymore, Sirius died, and James was a git." Harry shrugged. "So there were his friends gone. What was he like in the Sanctuary?"

"Better," said Peter. "But not perfect. The Seers don't try to make everyone the same as a 'normal' wizard, you know. They look at our souls and suggest ways to heal the gaps." Peter sipped from his tea, though it seemed an effort for him to open his mouth, which was set in a tight, angry line, long enough to get the tea down. "They suggested that Remus heal himself by coming to terms with his past—writing Snape, for example, though I don't know if he ever did that. Writing James. Writing werewolves." Peter sighed through his

nose. "And it worked so well that he found a new sense of belonging, a new set of friends, and chose them."

Harry frowned. "Then I don't see why he had no right to do what he did."

Peter twitched his nose in the manner of a rat sitting up its haunches to sniff the air for danger. "Because Remus has never learned that one sense of belonging doesn't have to cut out others," he muttered. "First he was an outcast, and he let that define him. Then he was our friend, and that was so important that he was able to ignore Sirius's steadily more deranged behavior, and stay afraid of his own rage. He was thirty-four years old in your third year, Harry, and he'd never come to terms with the fact that he was a werewolf." Peter shook his head. "And then he did, and scarpered as if that meant no one else was capable of understanding him anymore. Well, of course we weren't, if he didn't explain!

"He betrayed you, he acted as if his old friends should just give up demanding anything of him while at the same time wanting them to trust him, and he's acting like an idiot." Peter ran a hand agitatedly through his hair. "It's always one thing or another with Remus, the extremes, never the middle. If he could just remember that sometimes people are two or three things and not one, he'd be better off." He drank more of his tea, moodily.

Harry shrugged a bit. He didn't see it the same way, but then, he hadn't been friends with Remus since they were both children. "I wouldn't mind so much if he had just told me that things had changed," he muttered. "Instead, he left me to figure it out on my own."

Peter rapped his fingers on his cup. "I hope for his sake that this pack is true," he said, enough bitterness in his voice to scald a cat. "That they'll be his friends and not just use him. If not, I think Remus might break."

He took a deep breath and then straightened himself with a shake, as if the motion would put all mention of Remus behind them, turning to

Harry with a bright smile. "Now. I'm staying to help with the battle, after all, so let me show you how well I can call rats."

Harry peered into the depths of the crystal ball, and wished the Divination exam allowed someone to dream prophetic dreams instead. He was good at that, at least if he was allowed to talk about the Dark Lord and his plans for Great Britain. The proctor for this exam was a humorless woman who only seemed to accept a certain list of pre-designated symbols as "real" glimpses into the future.

Trying to clear his mind the way he would for Occlumency, Harry let his gaze drift downward into the crystal. Supposedly, this was how one used one's "inner eye," too. Trelawney's insipid, simpering voice would be in his head in a minute if he thought like that, though, so Harry forced that away and concentrated on the present.

"Well?" the proctor prompted, long before Harry was ready with a complete lie. "What do you See?"

Well, when in doubt, go for the dramatic performance. Harry gave a violent start and shiver, and then shrank back from the crystal ball. He lifted his eyes to the woman's startled face. "Death," he choked out. "My own!"

The proctor sat up and reached for her quill. "What symbols?"

"A Grim," said Harry, choosing it easily, since Sirius's dog form had looked like that. "A great black dog, walking slowly through a fog-drenched forest. It turned and looked out of the crystal at me, and I knew its eyes were beckoning me on to a deeper vision." Harry put his hand to his face and shuddered dramatically. Inwardly, he was congratulating himself. Visions-within-visions were supposed to be difficult to pull off. If she believed him, he ought to get a higher mark than he would have otherwise.

"And what did you See within its eyes?" Scratch, scratch, went her quill.

"Myself, caught in a storm of light," said Harry, improvising quickly. "It was fading behind me, like the last sunset I'd ever see. I stood in front

of a great snake and watched him slithering towards me. He had lightning bolts in his mouth, and around his tail he bore a bloody rose.”

“And what do those symbols mean?” Yes, there really was an undertone of excitement in the woman’s voice. Harry refrained from rolling his eyes, but it was a near thing.

“The snake means great danger,” said Harry. “And since I am enemy to Lord Voldemort, it means that he will deal my death. But he will do it by turning my own weapons against me.” He lifted his fringe so that the woman could see his lightning bolt scar. “Those are the lightning bolts. And the bloody rose around its tail—” He strained his memory for a moment. He knew the symbol was mentioned in Unfogging the Future, he could even see the page number that mentioned it, but his mind was as blank as the crystal ball for a moment while he struggled to remember.

“What?” the examiner asked.

“The bloody rose means something dangerous disguised as something sweet!” Harry was afraid that he shouted that last part, but he was vastly relieved to have remembered it. “Lord Voldemort will try to lure me into a trap that won’t look like a trap.”

“Remember this vision, Harry,” the woman said, her voice radiating importance. “It may be all that stands between you and You-Know-Who in the end.”

Harry bowed his head as if that had only now occurred to him. “Yes, ma’am.”

He grinned as her quill scratched wildly. If that’s not at least an E, I’ll eat my hand.

“I appreciate this, Luna,” said Harry, handing the final text of the article to her.

“You don’t need to thank me, Harry,” said Luna. She peered at the article for a moment as though she didn’t know what it meant, then

nodded and accepted it. "You're kind to the walls, you know. You don't stomp on the floors the way some of the other students do when they're angry." Luna frowned absently. "I wish they would stop that. They don't know what memories they're putting into the castle." She focused on him again. "You're a good person, Harry."

Harry knew he blushed. "Thanks, Luna." He nodded at the article. "Do you know when it'll run in the Quibbler?"

"Daddy ought to be able to print it in a few days or so." Luna gazed dreamily into the middle distance now. "I'm glad. I'll take a copy to everyone who wants it, including Professor Snape and the Headmistress." She shivered. "Even though I don't like being in the Headmistress's office."

Harry indulged his curiosity. The article detailing his support for werewolves' rights in his own words was finally finished, and he didn't have another exam today. "Why not?"

"I went there to tell her it was Gilbert Rovenan who'd used the Entrail-Expelling Curse on you, because the furniture said so," said Luna. "And her office was unfriendly. I do not know if it was the window, or the door, or the fireplace, or the desk, or the moving staircase. But something in it hated the whole world."

Harry frowned. Odd as Luna's intuitions were, they seemed usually trustworthy. "Perhaps it was Dumbledore's influence," he muttered. "I'll tell the Headmistress, Luna, just in case it's a curse she's overlooked."

"It's something that hates the whole world," Luna repeated earnestly. "Tell her to look for that."

"I will." Harry waved farewell as he moved in the direction of McGonagall's office. It was a long way from Ravenclaw Tower to the dungeons anyway. He might as well take this one more short diversion. "Thanks again for printing the article!"

“Of course,” said Luna, with dead seriousness. “It’s right that you should be for werewolves’ rights. Werewolves are much less dangerous than Wrackspurts.”

Argh. No. Two times sixteen is not twenty-eight. Harry carefully erased the calculation that would have made his whole Arithmancy problem come out wrong.

He cast a brief glance at the other students in the room, all bent over their own exams. Most of them looked like he felt, half-hysterical with weariness. They’d spent days frantically revising for this exam; out of the subjects studied at Hogwarts, only Ancient Runes was commonly regarded as harder than Arithmancy. Well, Harry supposed Potions was harder for most students, but only because of Snape, and only because they didn’t concentrate.

Hermione, of course, was the sole exception to the frantic scribbling of her classmates. Harry didn’t think she’d erased once, and her face shone as she wrote careful number after careful number. Harry shook his head. Connor had told him horror stories about Hermione and the “study parties” she’d organized for the rest of Gryffindor Tower. They would be all glad when the OWLs were done with and Hermione couldn’t badger the rest of them to study anymore.

I wonder if Connor realizes that next year she’ll organize study parties around the idea of getting ahead on the NEWTs? Harry thought in amusement, and turned back to his exam, mind rested for the small bout of thinking about other things.

Harry had just sat down at the Slytherin table for breakfast—he’d come from wishing Connor good luck in the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw Quidditch game, which was today—when the post owl landed on his arm. Harry took its weight with a gasp. It was a great horned owl, and far heavier even than Hedwig. It arranged its feathers with a few quick preens, and extended its leg insistently to him, reminding Harry for a moment of the king cobra he’d released in the Forbidden Forest.

The parchment of the letter bore the seal of Griffinsnest. Harry blinked. He hadn’t expected an answer from Gloriana so quickly. He

wondered if it was good news as he persuaded the owl to hop to his shoulder and opened the letter.

June 1st, 1996

Dear Harry:

I understand your plan to struggle for werewolves' rights. Though I cannot but think there will be more attacks, more bloodshed, and more victims cursed with lycanthropy before all is done, I would be remiss if I did not lend you information that may help you in fighting Loki's pack. Here is what I know about what I call 'accepted' werewolves:

-All accepted werewolves have spent time in the company of other accepted werewolves. Children bitten young, cast out of their homes, and taken in by a pack are the most common candidates for this position. Sometimes it happens with an adult who goes seeking the company of her 'own kind.' Werewolves who do not regularly associate with other cursed individuals do not develop this willingness to embrace the curse.

-Accepted werewolves demonstrate a greater strength and fluidity of body than any wizard. They can walk more silently, curl up in smaller places without claustrophobia, and endure greater extremes of heat and cold. You will know already about their enhanced senses, which are part of the burden of the curse for any werewolf.

-Accepted werewolves often take mates. Despite the many silly legends human wizards have about this—you would not believe how many I had to sort through when I was researching lycanthropy—this means little more than intense monogamy in practice. I have encountered no mated couple who had children of their own, unless the woman had borne them before taking the bite. Unborn children cannot survive the violent monthly transformations of a female werewolf. For this reason, accepted werewolves sometimes bite those of their female enemies they wish to condemn to childlessness.

-Accepted werewolves form pack structures that they claim imitate packs among natural wolves. Do not be fooled by this. A wolf alpha

can be replaced when his strength fails, or when a cleverer subordinate defeats him in a dominance fight. The alpha of a werewolf pack typically cannot. His position is a combination of charisma, magical strength, and what I call “fascination.” The magic of other accepted werewolves focuses on him and binds with his. They will not challenge him unless his magical strength is somehow drained. However, killing him beheads the pack, and usually forces it to break apart.

-Pack magic has the following effects: very powerful layered spells, as the werewolves’ magic combines, most often used to shield their presence from their prey; prevention of Apparition by ordinary wizards; increasing the strength of individuals, so that they may be able to smash through stone and steel; focusing the ‘packmind,’ so that the werewolves act and react as their leader does.

-I have been unable to learn as much as I would like about pack culture; they keep it secret, and usually live in places a witch like myself has no access to. I have learned that it is largely communal, dedicated to opening the wizarding world up to the Muggle one—the philosophy being that their own packs show that wizards and Muggles can live in harmony—and deeply invested in vengeance. They will punish those they see as acting against them, the murderers of their mates, and so on. The custom about which I know the most, for obvious reasons, is the Grand Hunt to prove the superiority of werewolves. This involves competing pairs, sometimes mates but usually not, choosing intentionally difficult targets on the night of the full moon. Mostly, these contests are to the death, with the werewolf who causes the most damage and gets away winning. Occasionally, if the victim survives but is infected, the contest moves to persuading the victim to become an accepted werewolf.

I trust I have given you enough to be going on with, vates. Please let me know if you need any more information.

Yours in the Light,

Gloriana Griffinsnest.

“Pleased?” Draco asked, leaning over his shoulder to see the letter.

“And why shouldn’t I be?” Harry responded, passing the letter to him so that he could actually eat his breakfast while Draco read it. “There were no new victims bitten last night, which probably means Loki is keeping his word about their target for this having been Melissa Rosewood, and I have a lot of new information on werewolves.” He smiled, and knew it wasn’t a pleasant smile.

All his research on werewolves so far indicated that the curse was a web—a violent, self-aware, Dark web that lived to torture its hosts, and had probably been invented by a cruel Dark wizard. It was one thing if a werewolf did manage to accept that and live with it, Harry supposed, though before Loki he had known only Fenrir Greyback as an example of a werewolf who had. But spreading that web to unwilling people was not on, and the moment Loki had chosen to do it, he had set himself up as Harry’s enemy, just as a wizard who was trying to weave a new web to confine the centaurs or goblins would have. Harry was not vates if he stood aside and let Loki get away with something like that.

I’ll save him and condemn him both at once, he reflected, as he drank his pumpkin juice. Help his people get rights, because that’s the right thing to do. But then make sure he loses the ability to spread the web to anyone who doesn’t want it. A stint in Tullianum ought to do nicely. Harry carefully repotted the honking daffodil, and then stepped away from the pot and looked at the proctor. She gave him a nod, indicating that his Herbology OWL was done, and he could go.

Harry let out an explosive breath as he walked outside. He kept going until he was standing by the lake, and could sit down, lean against a convenient boulder, and close his eyes. So that’s done, then. It really should have been done yesterday, but for some reason, there’d been some emergency in the headquarters of the Wizarding Examinations Authority—a mix-up with Portkeys, Harry thought he remembered hearing—and they hadn’t been able to come to Hogwarts until Saturday.

“Harry! What are you doing out here?”

“Relaxing after my Herbology OWL,” said Harry, opening his eyes and peering up curiously at Draco as he hurried towards him. “What does it look like?”

“You need to be getting ready to go to Diagon Alley,” Draco snapped, hauling him to his feet. “Or did you forget that the festival to celebrate my confirmation as Malfoy magical heir is tomorrow? We still need to get you proper robes, Harry, and my mother refused to take us shopping until the OWLs were done with.”

Harry swallowed. “All—all right, then.”

Draco caught his nervousness, and smirked. “Honestly, Harry,” he said, steering him rapidly towards the edge of the grounds. “It’s not going to be as hard as revising, I promise.”

That depends on your perspective, Harry reflected, and prepared himself to face the exposure of his own absolute lack of understanding about which dress robes looked good and which didn’t.

Interlude: Prince of Cats

June 1st, 1996

Dear Harry:

I wanted you to know that I am committed to your cause. Fully, deeply, absolutely. I will not act against your principles, because they are mine as well. My uncle tended to think that ends justify the means—or, at least, that the ends of Light wizards justified their means. I will never make that mistake.

You have taught me more than you'll ever know. When you met me, I was little more than a disaffected rebel from everything my uncle taught me and believed in. Oh, I had reasons for my rebellion—I thought. But if someone had sat me down and forced me to look at those reasons, I would have found little more than childish sulking. You were the one who taught me to bring the grains of truth under that sulking to light.

I slowly came to realize, gazing at my uncle and my brother and pondering the reasons why they would not swear you allegiance as unconditionally as I did, that I despised them, and not just for their treatment of me. All they could do was look backwards. My uncle often spoke as if my mother were still alive. He valued her memory more than he valued his living nephews, unless those nephews complied in every respect with what he expected of Alba's sons, not themselves. And Pharos adapted himself to what my uncle thought he should be. Every bit of his own independence, his own spark, was crushed out of him long ago. That is the reason the Starrise family is faltering now, and why the power among the northern Light families has passed to Gloryflower. He is Alba's son still, not Augustus's heir, and certainly not a leader in his own right.

But I have looked at my own principles, and now I believe in what you say because it makes sense to me, not because it will annoy my brother. My uncle had doomed himself, according to those principles. The past needs to be seen in balance with the present and the future. The dead cannot control or compel the living unless the living allow them to do so. Behavior restricting the free will of others is repugnant

because it acts, ultimately, against the free will of all. And the Light is wider than the narrow, inflexible image my uncle created of it.

I say to you now: Thank you for bringing me home. Thank you for showing me that I was not wrong in Declaring myself for the Light. And thank you for giving me a real reason to despise those who live like Augustus Starrise.

It is partly out of gratitude that I will bring the linchpin to you, but far, far more because it is a continuation of those principles we both share.

Yours in the Light,

Tybalt Starrise.

Chapter Eighty-Five: Draco's Debut

Harry closed his eyes and tried not to feel ridiculous. It was no use, though. He could feel the blush mounting up through his cheeks and his ears, mantling his face. He must have been more embarrassed at some point in his life, but he couldn't remember it.

"Could you make her hurry up?" he hissed out of the corner of his mouth at Draco.

"You can't hurry an artist, Harry," said Narcissa. Her voice was gentle, not as amused as Harry would have expected, and rather abstracted. A moment later, Harry heard the slight flick of her hands as she told the deaf robe-maker exactly what she wanted.

Harry let his eyes open up a slit. He stood on a raised stool in the middle of a shop he hadn't known existed, called Deianira's, which Harry considered a rather gruesome joke. The old witch who had met them was not Deianira herself—maybe they had named the shop after the legend and not a witch—but Ariadne Kaliadnos. Narcissa had treated her with great respect, spoken to her in sign language, and apparently told her what kind and color of robes they wanted. Ariadne had stared at Harry from cold blue eyes, then put him on the stool and started the robe-fitting.

With plenty of long, sharp needles and pins to help her, which poked Harry when he shifted too much. If she used magic to aid her, Harry couldn't sense it. That was probably what Narcissa meant by "artistry."

Harry turned his head slowly from side to side, easing his cramped neck, and looked around the shop; he hadn't got much of a look when they came in. The walls were covered with such thick draperies of cloth that Harry couldn't see what material they were made from. Robes of red and green and blue and a truly disgusting yellow hung in half-finished states on statues. The windows were small and dim. Harry supposed the view on Knockturn Alley wasn't anything to brag about, but he would have preferred some light.

He shifted his weight from one leg to the other, because he couldn't help himself, and Ariadne poked him with a pin. Harry yelped and glared down at her. She glared back at him, and returned to stitching on the hem of the robe. The robes were dark green. Draco insisted they made him look smashing. Harry didn't know about that. He didn't really care anymore. He had envisioned a boring journey through several shops in search of formal robes, too, but he had at least thought there would be movement. Based on his treatment so far in Deianira's, it didn't seem so.

Ariadne somehow flashed a message at Narcissa out of the mass of pins and needles and measuring appliances and Merlin knew what else that she held. Narcissa responded, and Ariadne let out a little grunt of satisfaction before going back to her stitching. Harry turned his glare on Narcissa.

"What did you tell her?" he demanded. "And why do you know that sign language anyway?"

"Oh, it's not really a sign language," said Narcissa absently, watching Ariadne stitch the new symbols with a small smile of satisfaction. "Not the kind the necromancers use, at least, and with nowhere near the complexity. It's merely a set of signals for agreed-upon words that come up in Madam Kaliadnos's work. As for how I know it, all the regular patrons of Deianira's have to learn it. Madam Kaliadnos insists on it. Those who won't learn it are obviously unfit for her services in any case."

Harry lapsed back into a grumpy silence. "You didn't answer my first question," he ventured a bit later.

Narcissa gave him a sharp-edged smile. "No, I didn't, did I?" she said. "All is well, Harry. I merely told her that she could put on symbols identifying you as the Black heir. After all, you are now, and one might even consider you the Black, since Regulus has—left." Narcissa did take care to delicately shade her conversation since they'd arrived in Knockturn Alley, Harry noticed. "They'll make the robes look impressive to the quality of Dark purebloods we're getting at Draco's festival."

“Not very intelligent ones, then?” Harry muttered.

“Harry,” said Narcissa, and her face was so serious that he blinked. “I will not have you ruining Draco’s festival,” she whispered, leaning nearer to him now. “I do not think there is a very great chance of that, but it may come about by accident. Understand that the people who will attend this festival value symbols and designs and gestures very highly, whether or not you do. And the festival to welcome a magical heir is a formal occasion. You will impress them to the degree that you remember that.”

Harry sighed and cast his eyes down. The bad things about getting joined to a pureblood Dark heir, he thought in resignation. “Yes, Mrs. Malfoy.”

Narcissa touched his hair for a moment. “In most things, I think you’ll do just fine,” she murmured. “But you really have been ignoring important gestures, Harry, or you have allowed your allies to make them for you. The appearance of the centaurs and the dragon at the alliance meeting, for example. Remember the value of symbols. They can contrive to make people accept things that otherwise they would reject out of hand.”

Harry cast a glance at Draco, who was leaning against a far shelf filled with bolts of cloth and watching him with an intent expression. He didn’t like as though he worried about what kind of impression Harry would make at the festival, or how much of a prat he looked standing there trying to avoid the jabs of Madam Kaliadnos’s pins. He just looked—happy, and as though he appreciated the dark green robes.

I can do this for him, Harry thought. After all, he pretends most of the time that he’s a perfectly forward-thinking embracer of Muggleborns, and that he isn’t afraid of centaurs or venomous snakes any more.

He straightened his back, flinched as another pin poked him, and decided to put on the best show he could—for Draco’s sake.

Draco would have thought he would always know Malfoy Manor. After all, he hadn’t only lived there most of his life; his father had taught him history in its rooms, had told him stories of where various

ancestors had slept or bedded their partners or fought heroic battles against Mudblood invaders, had shown him artifacts that were connected intimately to the places that housed them, and had taught him early on the purposes of certain rooms—to remove glamours, for example.

But now he didn't recognize it. He stood in the doorway and stared at the great hall where his parents had arranged to hold the confirmation of his ascending to Malfoy magical heir, and his mind traced no familiar walls, saw no familiar doors, didn't remember the places where his father had walked with Draco just beside him, or his mother had walked with Draco in her arms.

The walls had vanished behind elaborate glamours that linked to the skies outside, but were themselves more perfect shades of dark blue than the sky would ever show, speckled with small imagined planets. The constellation Draco had taken the place of the ceiling, with silver lines of light connecting the stars for their slower guests who might not understand its purpose. Now and then, loud cries sounded from the walls of air, as though real dragons roamed just out of sight.

The tables themselves were creations of light and silver and stone; Draco didn't know what on them was real and what wasn't. His father had had the time to specially commission them, that was sure. The blue-gray cloths that covered them provided a subtle transition from the dark blue walls. Draco was sure that that was deliberate.

House elves would fill the room, bringing food and wine to anyone who required it, but glamours kept them out of sight, Narcissa had told him, so that the food would simply appear, as it did at Hogwarts. Subtle spells would insure that the guests avoided saying certain words that might disrupt the atmosphere, urging them towards the expression of others. But spells under that would encourage everyone's rational thinking, no matter how much wine they swallowed. Discussion of politics and business, certain to happen, would require it.

Draco had grown up knowing what it meant to be pureblood, but he had never experienced the equivalent of the rarified, distilled environment that surrounded him now. It made him a little heady.

And he would be bringing a halfblood joined partner into the middle of all of this.

Draco shook his head, and felt a faint smile curve his mouth. This wasn't the first time something like this had been done. After all, halfbloods were more acceptable than Mudbloods, if only just, and Harry's magical power was unquestioned. Most of their guests would consider that Draco had done well for himself when they felt Harry's strength. And the ring, and Harry's presence at the festival at all, would proclaim that his partner didn't find gatherings like this uncomfortable. Powerful halfbloods with some sense of polish were best of all.

The things that might go wrong were still endless, but Draco thrust the thought of them away. Harry had one of the finest senses of personal empathy he'd ever seen, and an overwhelming presence, when Draco could persuade him to exercise it. He would do well enough at this gathering.

And anyone who might try to insult him would either find his mouth blocked by one of the Malfoy spells watching for insults to the family, or mark himself in an instant as unfit for a gathering of this caliber.

Draco turned abruptly and made his way to the doors, where the first guests would be arriving. Part of his duties as Malfoy magical heir at this festival included acting as a competent host. You're an adult, his parents' every gesture towards him today had said. Let us see you act like it.

You will, Draco promised, and opened the front doors of the Manor. Harry yanked fretfully at the collar of his formal robes.

"You'll wrinkle them," said Draco calmly from his right side. "Stop. They look fine."

"They don't," Harry hissed. He was convinced that the formal robes were too long, since they swished around his ankles with more thickness and more insistence than his normal school robes. Besides, the collar was too high, and the dark green color made him look as if he were walking around in a pine tree, and the silver symbols stitched along the hem and cuffs...Merlin knew what they said, but Harry was rather afraid they reflected more disturbing things about him than his merely being the Black heir.

"They do." Draco reached out and captured his chin, forcing Harry to look at him. His own face had that serene expression Harry remembered from Walpurgis Night. "Really, Harry. You're going to stun them, even the ones who know you. And no, I'm not saying that only because I love you." He gave Harry a little smile and held out his arm. "Ready? It's almost sunset."

Harry sighed and settled his hand on Draco's arm in the position they'd practiced, to send all the right signals to the room. They had to enter the hall, and thus officially begin the festival, at the moment of sunset, since Draco had been born then. Even though it wasn't the fifth of June, but the second, Narcissa had been insistent that they observe the protocols.

"Happy birthday, by the way," Harry muttered to him from the corner of his mouth.

Draco's face lost its calmness. "What did you make me?" he asked Harry eagerly.

Harry laughed at him. "It's not actually your birthday yet, remember? You can't have your gift until the fifth."

"You should make me one anyway," said Draco.

"I'm giving you one right now," said Harry. "Appearing at this festival with you is my gift for the day."

Draco opened his mouth to argue, but just then, the doors of the hall swung open, the cue for their entrance. Draco's head lifted in a moment, and he adopted yet another serene expression. Harry

wondered if he had a closetful of them, and entertained himself for a moment with the image of Draco taking calm masks off hooks and deciding which one he liked best.

“Here we come,” Draco murmured, and Harry tugged himself back from his thoughts in enough time to walk exactly beside Draco as they entered the room, and not trip over the hem of the stupid dress robes.

Harry hadn’t seen the hall before. He hadn’t realized how much the Malfoys had sculpted it to look like sunset inside. He controlled his urge to gape, putting in place the mask Lily had taught him for formal occasions like this—mildly appreciative, but deeply unimpressed—and turned to follow Draco across the front of the room to the table that stood at the far right wall.

Light spells glittered and flashed off his ring. Harry heard more than one murmur. He didn’t try to make them out. Anyone who didn’t realize he was doing a joining ritual with Draco by now was a nutter. More likely, they were trying to figure out the significance of the ring as a joining gift, or telling each other about the symbolism of the jacinth.

Draco reached the table, and the part Harry really hated started. Luckily, it was short. Draco turned to face his guests across the tabletop, his back nearly against the sunset-glamoured wall, and Harry had to stand beside him. He had to look out across faces staring at him with various politely-bred expressions of curiosity, interest, and disdain, especially from those who hadn’t met him before.

And he had to listen to Draco praise him like he was some bloody Lord.

“Welcome to the festival confirming me as the Malfoy magical heir,” said Draco, in a smooth, deep voice, which Harry suspected he’d adopted from his father. Harry preferred the way he normally sounded. “My name is Draco Malfoy, and in all matters tonight I mean to fully deserve the name. My father is Lucius Malfoy. My mother is Narcissa Black Malfoy. My blood runs with starlight and with power,

and I embrace all that means. Welcome.” He dipped his head, and waited until everyone had finished bowing back.

Then he started in on Harry. “By my side stands my to-be-joined partner, Harry, once called Potter, once son of James Potter and Lily Evans Potter.” The response was a susurrus rather than ordinary whispering, but Harry could hear it. He’d expected it, after the announcement of his Muggleborn mother’s name. He restrained the childish temptation to yell the name back in their faces, and also to point out, helpfully, that two of the most powerful wizards he knew, Voldemort and Snape, were halfbloods. “Now called vates, a Lord-level wizard, the Boy-Who-Lived, friend of centaurs and defeater of Dumbledore.”

Harry bowed his head. Most people bowed back. A few stared arrogantly at him, with a stiffness to their necks that said they didn’t see the point of acknowledging him. Harry narrowed his eyes.

It’s childish, perhaps, but Draco did say that a lack of respect conceived in a place like this can follow me for the rest of the joining ritual.

He lowered one of the barriers on his power, and pure magic flooded the room, especially noticeable because so many of the spells on the walls and floor and house elves were subtle. Some of the wizards still staring at him as if he were something the Kneazle had dragged in widened their eyes most satisfactorily. Harry restored the shield a moment later, and sat down in his place, as he was supposed to do.

He picked up his wineglass, and in the next second it was full of shining dark liquid, courtesy of the disguised and incredibly coordinated house elves. Harry restrained the impulse to roll his eyes, and waited for Draco’s toast.

Draco spoke the words perfectly, of course, holding his glass high, and in that moment, he looked as Malfoy as Harry had ever seen him—and as flawless.

“To the future,” Draco said clearly. “To the power of magic spreading and flourishing in bloodline after bloodline, in magical heir after

magical heir. To the preservation of our world.” Harry tensed in interest at what was coming next. Each magical heir got to choose the last line of the toast, Draco had told him, and it was often the first way he or she made a mark on the adult world.

Draco darted a quick glance at Harry, and then he smiled.

“To freedom,” he said, “and to will.” Then he lifted the wineglass to his lips, and all around the room, people followed suit.

Draco sat back down, well-aware of the half-astonished, half-wary look Harry had worn from the moment of the toast. He didn’t care. What mattered was that he’d made it, and declared himself in a way that even making his Declaration to the Dark right now wouldn’t have allowed him to do. He smiled at Harry and looked down at his plate, which was covered with the first course, a delicately seasoned pie of venison. Draco’s mouth watered for a moment

Then he cut off a precise piece and held it out to Harry on the end of his fork. Harry’s astonished look deepened, and then his eyes hardened. He and Draco had discussed the idea of feeding each other, and decided they wouldn’t do it.

What are you doing? he was asking now.

Draco cocked his head. He was better at reading the mood in the room than Harry was. He’d sensed more hostility than he wanted the moment they stepped inside the hall. Yes, it was idiocy, but there were some wizards here who would still see Harry’s blood status as the most important thing about him; even that pulse of magic would only convince them that the Malfoys had somehow found a way to harness a dragon, not that the dragon could think for himself. Draco needed to send an undeniable signal that he held his future joined partner in high regard.

That the way to do that was to follow convention to the letter, instead of rebelling, was something he knew Harry would have a hard time understanding, and he had no time to explain. He held out the piece of pie and waited.

Harry glared one more time and opened his mouth. Draco placed the bit of pie on his tongue and watched as he chewed and swallowed. Harry's eyes widened once, and he seemed about to choke; obviously, the taste of venison didn't agree with him. But he was far too well-mannered to spit it out. He inclined his head in a small nod to Draco, and then turned to cut his own pie and return the favor.

Draco smiled and waited for the serving. Harry had cut a much larger piece, probably as vengeance. He certainly watched in disbelief as Draco ate it with relish. Draco didn't really know what Harry disliked so much about it. Yes, the flesh was a bit gamy, but that was part of its charm; it was one of the more flavorful pureblood dishes.

He fed Harry more of the pie, keeping one eye on their guests all the while. The hall was filled with tables facing the one where he and Harry sat, to display the magical heir—and his or her partner, of course—to the whole room. Draco caught many glances in their direction, especially from those wizards who hadn't met Harry before. They would also be evaluating him, though, so he kept his face cool and his posture perfectly straight.

He nodded to those who caught his eye, or at least would admit to catching his eye. A surprising number were of those families who hovered distant from the Malfoys, and were often their rivals for influence in the Ministry. Draco knew they were wondering if he was a worthy successor to Lucius. He answered them with a smile like blue light on winter snow. They would know that he was, or they would fall before him. He wasn't sure which outcome would please him more.

The house elves whisked away the pie long before Draco had tired of reading faces and, through them, minds, and brought the second course, diced and salted manticore tails. Draco picked up the first bit and offered it to Harry with his fingers before he could touch anything.

Harry didn't object this time, or even insert the slight pause that he had before accepting the venison pie. He leaned forward and took the offering with a lightness that had Draco struggling to hide a grin. Harry understood, then, that flirting was out of the question. They had to present a perfectly stoic façade for this part of the evening.

Later, when they danced, they could get rid of that, and Draco was going to enjoy doing so.

He caught Charles Rosier-Henlin's eye as he took a bit of the manticore tail from Harry in turn. The man was obviously fighting to repress a grin, but his twin sons, with him, looked unaccountably earnest. Draco narrowed his eyes the tiniest fraction. If they think they have a chance with either Harry or me, they can forget it. The Rosier-Henlin boys were handsome enough, pureblooded enough, and wealthy enough to qualify as acceptable partners for him if Harry hadn't existed, but Harry did, and there was no question of any other person, for either of them.

On the meal flowed, with the introduction of sweet bread and fish from the Mediterranean and wine-soup and delicately flavored fruit, and Harry played the game well, accepting food from Draco's fork or spoon or fingers as the moment dictated, offering his own food in return, and ignoring most of the stares he got. Actually, to think about it, Draco wasn't sure if that last was Harry playing the game or just not caring what anyone else thought of him.

The end of the meal would be a challenge, Draco knew, and he heard Harry hiss under his breath as it appeared on their plates. It was a small scoop of ice cream in a silver dish, or at least it had started out that way. Magic had wound dozens of flavors into it, and spun it with trails of pure sugary icing in so many colors that they blazed under the deep blue lights of the hall. Draco could feel his mouth water. The sweetness was exquisite, but it was so much trouble for even house elves to make that Draco had tasted it only a few times in his life.

Harry would need to use his spoon to feed it to Draco, and he would need to do it first—another consequence of his being a halfblood in a pureblood gathering, yielding the sweetest of the food to his host and the partner most purebloods would see as undeniably superior. They'd discussed this, but then put aside the idea when they'd decided they wouldn't be serving each other their food. Draco hoped desperately that Harry would remember it now.

He did, though his face was distant as he scooped up a part of his own ice cream on his spoon and held it out.

Draco smiled at him and took his wrist, an undeniable mark of favor, as he leaned in to swallow the dessert. It felt like twenty ice-cold fruits, none of them mingling with each other, exploding in his throat at once. He swallowed around melon and apple and orange and others he could barely recognize, and reached for his own spoon with a hand that didn't shake, no matter how much it wanted to. "Your turn," he said.

Harry's eyebrows twitched as if he wanted to roll his eyes, but he opened his mouth and waited obediently. Draco gently tipped the ice cream in, and waited, holding his breath, for the next and most challenging part of this—the one that would have been a challenge even if they hadn't started feeding each other. He knew Harry had never encountered something of this sweetness before, and he wasn't completely sure if the left-over remains of his childhood training wouldn't lead to an unfortunate accident.

Harry swallowed, and his eyes widened. There was one horrible moment when Draco thought he would surely spit the ice cream back out. But then his eyes closed and his head tilted to the side, and he uttered a soft sigh that made Draco think unfortunate thoughts about private rooms and lengths of time that guests could reasonably expect their hosts to be gone.

He looked at Draco in the next moment, and gave him a smile of pure sensual enjoyment.

"Thank you," he murmured.

Draco knew that more than one person would have heard that—the preparation his parents had done would permit certain listening spells on their table—and felt a surge of power. Adherence to formal gestures would help, but nothing could compare with the true and avid bliss on Harry's face, or the way his eyes shone as he looked at Draco.

If this doesn't convince them that he's in love with me, nothing will, Draco thought, and leaned forward to take his next swallow of ice cream.

Harry could still taste sweetness tingling in his mouth when the meal was done. He almost wanted to ask for more of the ice cream, even though he knew it was a special sweet that the Malfoy house elves had worked hard to prepare. He even felt vaguely guilty at the thought that he'd enjoyed it so much when house elves had been the ones to labor to make it.

But he hadn't known any food could taste that good. For the first time, Harry was willing to believe Vera when she said that other people found sweet tastes a temptation, and thought it might be a good thing to overcome the training that had taught him to ignore chocolate.

Draco rose to his feet when the ice cream vanished, and inclined his head. "After the welcome and the food," he said quietly, "the presentation of gifts is in order, for those who wish to make them."

Harry sat on his own anxiety. As Draco had told him, this was the most vulnerable place in the festival. If no one had bothered to bring a gift, then the magical heir would look foolish standing in front of the room and awaiting something that never came.

Draco didn't look foolish, though. He looked utterly composed, as though never doubting that someone would have decided to bring him offerings.

And, of course, someone had. Harry turned his head at a glimpse of movement, and saw Hawthorn Parkinson advancing calmly up the aisles between the tables, clad in dark formal robes that emphasized her pallor and her blonde hair. Her neck flashed with an ornament Harry hadn't seen before, a medallion depicting a rose wound with thorns. It was probably a hereditary Parkinson piece.

Harry was occupied enough in studying it that he didn't realize the more significant fact about it for a long moment. It was made of silver, and Hawthorn wore it next to her bare skin with nary a flinch.

He looked, startled, into her eyes as she laid the small wooden box she carried down before Draco and bowed her head. Hawthorn looked back at him. Her gaze was as simple and direct as a shout.

Harry had written her about Remus, and about Loki's politics, not sure how she would respond. The medallion was her answer. She was a pureblood witch, first and foremost. She would not let even a werewolf's vulnerability to silver—and the pain the silver ornament had to be causing her—define her otherwise.

Harry blinked away any unfortunate emotions that might have crossed his face, and turned back to see Draco opening the box. His gasp was loud and heartfelt, but as he held up the gift, Harry couldn't see why. It looked like a ring, made of gold, set with a tiny sapphire—valuable, of course, but nothing more.

Then Draco looked at Hawthorn and said, "Thank you. The generosity of Parkinson in sharing its magic with us shall not be forgotten."

The murmur picked up in the hall again, running from person to person, and Hawthorn inclined her head, a tiny smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "The generosity of Malfoys to their friends is well-known," she said. "I thought it worthwhile to answer a virtue with a virtue."

She turned and swept back to her seat, where Pansy waited in silence beside her chair. Harry found his eyes turning back to the ring, in disbelief.

Hawthorn had pulled out a piece of her own magic, solidified it, and given it to Draco. Or, rather, she had gone to a specialist in Knockturn Alley who could do it for her. That magic was permanently gone from her, weakening her, and would come to Draco's aid whenever he decided to dissolve the jewel and summon it.

Harry remembered what Adalrico Bulstrode had told him when he yielded up his own magic to keep Elfrida a witch. Dark purebloods valued magical strength more than anything, in the end (despite the resistance some people in the hall seemed to be having to the idea of

his own power). To yield it, to sacrifice it, was something that most Dark wizards would do only for magical heirs, and even then not until their deaths. Hawthorn's gift was royal, and almost certainly no one here tonight was going to match it.

Draco slid the ring onto one finger, admiring it, and then waited again in the tense silence that followed. Harry wondered idly if anyone else would dare advance. Weren't they afraid of being embarrassed in contrast with Parkinson?

Adalrico Bulstrode did advance at last, though, with Millicent close at his side, as his magical heir. He limped, but he didn't let the limp slow him; rather, his whole body had adjusted to a dignity Harry didn't remember from the last time he'd seen him, so that he looked as if the limp were an old war wound, or badge of honor. He gave Draco a stately bow as he extended a dagger with a black stone in the hilt.

"For the Malfoy magical heir, on the eve of his confirmation," he said. Harry thought he sounded a bit like a card. "The blade was forged by my ancestors for use in the goblin rebellions, and the stone comes from the walls of our estate. We call him Sigurd, in memory of a hero who struck true more often than that. This blade shall always strike true, for you."

"My thanks," said Draco softly, taking the dagger up in one hand and turning it around. "It is a beautiful and marvelous weapon. The nobility of Bulstrode shall no more be forgotten than the generosity of Parkinson."

It was a wording that would insult nobody, Harry thought; Draco was being careful. Everyone in the room would still know that Hawthorn's gift, as the greater treasure, was the more valuable, but the wording permitted Adalrico to retire with his dignity and a smile.

Draco slipped the dagger into his robe pockets and resumed the motionless statue posture. Harry looked around for the next flicker of movement and was startled to see Arabella Zabini standing and moving among the tables. Granted, she had been invited and had the right to present a gift if she so desired, but Harry couldn't see her so desiring. She'd never seemed particularly friendly with Lucius or

Narcissa, and Blaise's distance from Draco in school was another argument for that stance.

She carried a set of bells in her hands, and she laid them down on the table in front of Draco. Harry leaned forward to see them better. They appeared to be carved of crystal, from the way they shone and tinkled—but it was blue crystal, and their ringing trembled in Harry's ears as if it were a sound far away, like the sea roaring in a seashell.

"For the Malfoy magical heir," Arabella said, taking a step back and smiling, a sudden flash of white teeth in her beautiful dark face. "Rather than a weapon of war, a gift of dreams and mystery. Ring them, young sir, and only the music knows what dreams may come."

So that explains her giving him a gift, Harry thought, more comfortable now that he knew the bells' purpose. A challenge, a test. I wouldn't want to see what happens, necessarily, when he rings those bells.

Draco picked them up without hesitating, however, untwined the delicate silver chain on which they hung, and gave them a shake. Harry gasped at the sound of their music. Fawkes's singing barely rivaled it.

The room quivered around them and went giddy, and Harry caught a glimpse of distant mountains. It retreated in moments, however, and left Draco smiling and dipping his head to Arabella.

"Thank you," he said. "When the test comes, I shall remember that Zabini gave a gift of dreams and mystery."

That was nicely ambiguous enough that Arabella didn't look entirely satisfied as she went back to her seat. Harry restrained the impulse to shake his head in amusement. Did she think Draco would be an easier target than his parents, or was she counting on him not shaking the bells at all?

Charles Rosier-Henlin and his twin sons, Owen and Michael, were next. Harry studied their faces in unabashed curiosity as they walked up to the table. He thought he could see shadows in their eyes from

their ordeal in Durmstrang, but they didn't seem incapable of smiling, only constrained from it by the solemnity of what they were doing. He relaxed a bit.

Charles nodded to Draco, but said, "The old tradition of festivals for a magical heir allowed guests to present gifts to his future joined partner or spouse as well as directly to him. Do you accept this tradition, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco didn't act caught at all off-guard, though Harry stared. "I could hardly deny the validity of it," said Draco, "when I have been accepting gifts from my future partner all night—most simply, the gift of his presence. By all means. I would like to see what you have for Harry." He stepped slightly out of the way, to represent that this gift was not coming to him.

Harry stood, because Draco had. He could see no object in Charles's hands, though, and wondered what the gift was to be.

Charles stepped back, so Harry turned his attention to Owen and Michael. Owen—Harry thought it was Owen, from remembering the face of the boy Bellatrix had tortured in the Great Hall of Durmstrang—stood in front of his brother as he pulled out a dagger. Harry tensed in spite of himself.

"Harry, called vates, called the Boy-Who-Lived," said Owen in an exquisitely formal voice, "my brother and I owe you a life debt. At great peril, you came into Durmstrang and rescued us from the domination and torture of Bellatrix Lestrange. Innocence once lost can never be recovered, but lives preserved are worth future preservation, and all honor to the savior. I ask you now whether you have any wish to collect on this life debt, or whether you will turn it over to my brother and I, for payment as we wish." He lifted his dark eyes to Harry's face and waited.

Harry stifled a shiver. He knew Owen was at least a year older than he was, and possibly closer to two. It was slightly creepy to see him so submissive. But then, he was a pureblood in this moment more than he was an adolescent.

And he had asked Harry a question.

Harry let out a sharp breath and said, "You may fulfill the life debt as you will. I will not call on it or constrain you in any way."

Owen nodded, and drew back the sleeve on his left forearm. Michael was mimicking him. He turned to place his forearm over his brother's, so that when Owen slashed with the knife, he cut both of them at once.

"Then we pledge our loyalty to you," said Owen, voice proud and unflinching despite the blood that flowed from his arm, "as the Broken Guard did, as the Order of the Serpent did, as the Ladies of Walpurgis did. As guards, as courtiers, as couriers, as running hounds, as whatever you need us to be, then we are yours, for the saving of our lives and our sanity." He had cut a pattern that Harry couldn't entirely make out under the blood, but which looked like a lightning bolt.

Harry caught his panic and threw it back in a cage. He reminded himself that Voldemort had marked his Death Eaters on the left forearm because of a long tradition of Lords marking their companions that way, and the custom hadn't been unique to him.

And those ancient Lords and Ladies worth anything had treated their companions as companions—not the mindless minions Voldemort expected his Death Eaters to be, nor the mindless fanatics the Order of the Phoenix had turned into.

Owen and Michael chose to do this. Draco's long-ago words about not turning away or denying the free will of those who chose to follow him—and serve him, disgusting as the word was—echoed in Harry's mind.

He lifted his eyes and fastened them on Owen's face, which was silent and waiting and a bit apprehensive, despite everything. He would know that Harry might at least consider flinging the gift back in their faces.

Harry said quietly, "The pledge is accepted, and to you I return guarantees of protection, loyalty, and constancy. While I live, you shall never lack for a guardian, a champion, or a friend."

They weren't any old and ancient oath, because most of those promised more than Harry was willing to deliver; most of those were only used by Lords. They were words that Harry had decided on, and they eased the tightness in both Owen's and Michael's faces. Both swept bows as one.

"An honor to be beside you, Harry," said Owen, and looked down with a faint smile. "And the oath is true." Harry followed his gaze and saw that the wounds had already healed. The scars did look like lightning bolts. To his immense relief, they were only white, not any ridiculous combination of colors.

Owen and Michael, along with Charles, returned to their seats, and Draco stood. "I think the dancing can begin, now that the ritual of gifts has ended so satisfactorily," he murmured. "Amoveo mensas!"

And the tables vanished easily, the magic worked into the room responding to Draco as Malfoy magical heir, and it was time for the dancing, and now Harry had the chance to be incredibly terrified.

Draco waited calmly for his guests to get out of the way; the tables vanishing had caught them partly by surprise, though the truly alert had known what was coming when he announced the dancing and were ready to move. The chairs remained, however, so as not to place anyone suddenly on the floor. This part was about testing the alertness of the guests, not humiliating them.

Draco murmured the charm that removed the chairs, and then turned and extended his hand to Harry. Harry took it with a grimace that Draco doubted anyone else would notice, since no one else was standing as close; the skin around his eyes tightened, and his teeth briefly showed in a tiny hiss.

"You have nothing worry about," Draco whispered as they moved out into the middle of the room. Music began to play, the soft sound of harps and flutes also disguised under glamours and charmed to start

the moment someone walked into the area formerly occupied by the tables. "I know you can dance. I watched you at the Yule Ball last year, remember, and I was horribly jealous of Loony all the while."

Harry didn't even smile. His hand squirmed in Draco's as if he wanted to tug at the collar of his robes again. "I wasn't wearing robes like these," he whispered. "I'll trip over the hem."

"No, you won't," Draco said, encouragingly, and began the first steps of the dance. They'd practiced this, but only in school robes. Harry began to grudgingly move in the constraints of the formal robes he was so worried about. He'd smoothed his scowl into composure by the time other people could start to take notice, to Draco's relief.

"I'm not comfortable here," Harry murmured, hardly moving his lips. "I'm not used to this, and I don't think I should have let Owen and Michael swear loyalty to me, and half the room still thinks my blood status is good enough reason to despise me."

"Half the room?" Draco released Harry's hand long enough to do a turn on his own, then caught it again. They'd had to choose the dance carefully, so as not to require Harry to make moves that were impossible with his lack of a left hand. "Not nearly that many of them, Harry. It's true that some of them might think you're a dragon on a leash right now, but they felt the purity of your power. They'll change their minds soon enough. Like you said, anyone who underestimates you deserves what it will cost him."

Harry just stared back at him, eyes, if not face, expressing his discomfort. Draco frowned. I honestly didn't think this would bother him so much. Why would it? He usually handles gift-giving ceremonies with ease. He handled all the talking at the alliance meeting even more easily. And he went to the Yule Ball and danced with Luna just because she asked, not to prove a point. Why are those same things hard on him now?

As he relaxed into the rhythm of the dance, Draco could let his eyes and mind rove, and study the way people watched Harry. He saw a great many tight-lipped glances and slight headshakes. There were

also plenty of spectators who were taking advantage of the music to speak their true feelings, as Draco and Harry had, and it seemed as if there was violent disagreement in many couples. And Draco also noted how many eyes went to Harry, instead of him, though traditionally this was a festival to show off the magical heir of the family, and not his joined partner.

He looked back at Harry, and saw that he moved with his shoulders hunched and his head only half-lifted, as if he expected someone to call out every moment that he had performed a step wrong. He was obviously not returning the gazes by a great effort, rather than being naturally and effortlessly focused on his partner. He didn't make mistakes in the dancing, but it was mechanical.

Draco blinked as the truth hit him. He really does feel out of place here. It's as simple as that, and as complex. There's nothing anyone can do to dislodge me from pureblood society. I'll always have my heritage, and the Malfoy name has gone through crises before, but it's always commanded respect.

Harry doesn't have that guarantee. The Potters command no respect here. And the taint of his mother is everywhere on him. The people watching him take any defensiveness as a sign that he knows he's not supposed to be here, and any ease as a sign that he's boorish and doesn't appreciate the finer subtleties of pureblood culture. He can't win no matter what he does. His halfblood status always will matter to them, even if his magical power comes to matter more.

Draco was glad that the music allowed he and Harry to dance far apart from each other then, even with their backs to each other for a brief moment, because he wanted to hide his face as the realization struck him.

That's why Harry hates those pureblood prejudices. They affect him, too. He knows everyone here thinks of him as the child of a Mudblood, though he knows dozens of pureblood rituals most of them wouldn't even recognize, though he could be their Lord tomorrow if he wanted to Declare, though he's dedicated to the survival and protection of the wizarding world in a way that most of them will never find the courage for.

I can't hate them for the sake of some Mudbloods I'll never know, for the sake of some grand ideal in the abstract. I'm not that compassionate. But I can hate them because they make Harry uncomfortable.

The dance finished, and the guests politely applauded. Draco caught Harry's hand and turned, bowing to the multitude. Harry bowed along with him, face perfectly blank. Draco had thought before how well he controlled his emotions, always something Dark purebloods had valued. Now all he could do was compare that mask to the one Harry had worn in his first and second years at Hogwarts, when he had locked his emotions in a box.

He hated it now.

He turned and faced the room again, and he knew his stance had shifted; if nothing else, now he had one hand on Harry's shoulder, where he hadn't touched him before except for some requirement of the dance. Harry looked at him in mild confusion. Draco looked back at him, and tried to convey his defiance through his facial expression. Harry only blinked, so Draco leaned close enough to whisper into his ear.

"How dare they make you uncomfortable," he hissed.

Harry frowned. "You don't think it's my fault for being uncomfortable with the customs here?" he asked, once again barely moving his lips.

"They're being idiots," Draco said. "They claim to value magic more than anything, and they've just seen two children of a pureblood family become your companions, and they know that my parents approve of you. That should be enough for them, given all their supposedly accepted standards. And it's not. They're being hypocritical, and I don't know about you, but I don't want to struggle uphill through vast wastes of idiocy just to propitiate people who claim to value what we already have."

"What do you want to do, then?" Harry asked, looking befuddled, his eyes moving to several other faces in the room. Draco smiled slightly.

He knew he'd been whispering into Harry's ear for several moments, and that definitely went against the constraints of propriety at an event like this, which called for less intimacy between a couple still courting.

"Something that will show them Malfoys are, and always have been, above propitiating idiocy, even when it's traditional," Draco replied, and grasped Harry's chin to turn his face towards him.

Harry raised an eyebrow and tried to lean in, but Draco held him still. To mean what he wanted it to mean, this gesture had to come from him, or the skeptical guests would see it as just another uncivilized rudeness from That Halfblood.

He kissed Harry gently, thoroughly, with attention to detail, even more deeply than Harry had kissed him at the alliance meeting, and until he could hear several distinctly uncivilized gasps. Then he raised his head and turned to smile lazily at their guests.

"I am the Malfoy magical heir," he said. "Starlight and power run in my blood, and so does protective instinct. You might want to know that I do love Harry, that I intend to join with him, and that staring at him as if Voldemort had just appeared in your midst does nothing but make me angry."

Most of them turned away in confusion, or outright grinned—that was from the ones who knew him and Harry, including Hawthorn Parkinson and the Bulstrodes. Draco grinned back. The nice thing about suddenly breaking with custom, he thought happily, is that no one knows what to do with you when you do.

His father could certainly seize the moment, though, and he did, appearing from between the dancers to place his hand on Draco's shoulder. Draco tilted his head back to look at his father, and saw a faint, cold smile on Lucius's face.

"Truly," Lucius murmured, "an occasion such as this should be a joyous one, and a polite one. I am sorry that it could be neither for those who chose to stare. Our own—lack of discrimination in sending out invitations must be to blame."

Draco felt a sharp joy rising in his heart. His father wasn't furious with him for breaking from tradition; he was furious at the guests who refused to recognize what was right in front of them. And he was making sure and certain everyone understood that his family was allied with Harry, and planned to stay that way.

"The ceremony is officially over with the dancing, and Draco's second invocation," Lucius said then. "House elves will assist you to the Floo and outside the Manor's wards once you leave the hall, if you plan to Apparate."

Draco choked back laughter as he watched the undignified scramble that ensued. Not everyone left that way, of course; the people who had given gifts to him and Harry, and several others who could recognize reality when it was staring them in the face, bowed their heads, their eyes bright with amusement, and stayed to offer their thanks to Lucius and their congratulations to Draco and Harry. Owen and Michael Rosier-Henlin approached for a rather different reason.

"Where would you like us to stay?" Michael—Draco thought it was Michael, the one who hadn't spoken so far—asked Harry.

Harry looked at them and sighed. Then he said, "I'll be leaving Hogwarts near the end of June, most likely. Do you want to accompany me there, or not? I'm afraid it will be rather boring."

"It would be relaxing," said the other, Owen, dropping his voice. "We're quite recovered from Durmstrang, thanks, but our parents aren't ready to believe it yet."

Harry wore a brief wistful expression before he nodded. "Then come with us. I'm sure they'll be able to find room for you. Most of Hogwarts goes unused right now."

Owen smiled briefly, and he and Michael melted away to wait. Harry turned to greet some of the others who had lingered.

In passing, his eyes met and held Draco's for a moment.

Draco held in a gasp it would not have been dignified to utter. In Harry's gaze was utter gratitude, and relief, and a love so profound that Draco felt a bit humbled by it.

For a moment.

Then he lifted his head. Well, I am a Malfoy, and this is my confirmation festival. And that was a rather nicer gift than any other I got.

Pleased with the way the evening had turned out after all, he turned to talk with Adalrico Bulstrode, and exchange politely barbed insults with Arabella Zabini.

Chapter Eighty-Six: Strategizing

Harry frowned at the letter in his hand. It was short, and really should not have caused as much shock and confusion as it did. It was a simple request, and he could say no, and the person who had made the request would be bound to obey.

It's my own sense of obligation to her that's making it hard to say no, he thought, and read the letter again.

June 4th, 1996

Dear Harry:

Since you told me about the battle you intend to hold on Midsummer Day, I have thought I would like to join you in it. Tell me if I can. I have conducted intensive studies of Transfiguration in the past few months, and you have reason to remember my skill with rune circles.

Sincerely,

Henrietta Bulstrode.

The problem, Harry thought as he lay back against his pillow, was that Edith Bulstrode was intending to stay at the school for the summer—she had no wish to stay with her father—and Harry had promised that Edith would not have to see Henrietta again. Henrietta would undoubtedly make a valuable addition to the battle, but Harry couldn't justify asking Edith to leave the school for that, even if it would only be for a few days. She had nowhere else to go, nowhere else she would feel safe. She barely trusted the strength of Hogwarts's wards to keep her hidden from her mother.

In the end, he wrote a refusal. He would post it with Hedwig tonight, and hope that Henrietta accepted it for what it was: an appreciation of her battle prowess, but a determination to abide by his promises, even when those promises had consequences he didn't especially like.

"Have you finished making my gift yet?"

Harry looked up, startled. Draco stood in the doorway of their bedroom, grinning at him with brilliant eyes.

“Not yet,” said Harry, and stood. “I have this letter to post, and anyway, it’s not your birthday until tomorrow, or don’t you remember?”

“I remember, of course,” said Draco with a sniff, fiddling with the ring on his finger that contained Hawthorn’s solidified magic. He had developed the habit to insure that everyone noticed it in the past few days, and once he explained what it was, he had received more than one envious and awed glance. Harry wondered if Draco realized that Harry himself wasn’t going to express awe past the initial acceptance of the gift. “But I thought you might want to give me a hint. Or a choice, the way that you did last year.” He slightly dipped his head, and regarded Harry from under his lowered eyelashes.

Harry choked as he remembered the bond Draco had asked for last year, connecting them mind to mind and making it impossible for him to hide any secrets or emotions. “You want that again?”

“I didn’t say that I wanted that,” said Draco. “Just that I might like to choose. Unless, of course, you want to tell me what gift you intend to get me now, and I can decide if I’d rather have that one.”

“All of this is just a ploy to get me to tell you what your gift is early,” said Harry with some determination, and picked up his letter. “I have to go to the Owlery. You are welcome to come with me and continue trying to worm the surprise out of me if you really want to.”

“It’s not just a ploy,” Draco complained as he trotted beside him. “Why should it be? Of course I’d want to know what the better gift was, one I imagined or one that you made. Why are you irritated with me, Harry?”

“I’m not irritated,” Harry corrected him, as they went through the entrance hall and made their way up the first staircase. “I’m exasperated. There’s a difference.”

Draco tried a few other “subtle” ways of asking for his gift early, causing Harry to shoot him continual disgusted glances. They met Michael and Owen when they were on the fifth floor and near the quarters McGonagall had assigned them, though, so that distracted Draco thoroughly. He’d already told Harry that he didn’t like the way Owen watched him, trying to absorb indications of his intent from his face and actions.

Harry concealed his chuckle, and wondered if Draco had noticed the way Michael watched him yet. Harry couldn’t imagine it turning serious; Michael, as the son of a Dark pureblood family, would know what this courting ritual meant, and that he stood no chance of breaking apart a couple joined by it. But he was perfectly welcome to admire Draco from a distance.

I think the world would be improved if more people did that, Harry thought, while he answered Owen’s questions about where he would be during the battle.

“I’ll need to be fighting Voldemort,” said Harry. “Apart from the fact that only my magic can counter his, there’s a prophecy that concerns the both of us, and he’ll be aiming for me.”

Michael nodded. “Do you want us to protect your friends and partner, then?” he asked, gaze sliding to Draco. Harry hid a smirk, both at the question and at Draco’s indignation that anyone would consider him in need of protection.

“I would appreciate your help in doing so,” Harry admitted. “Distant guardianship, at their shoulders, because Draco, Snape, and my brother all need to be free to move around during the battle. There may be a slight chance that they’re in less danger than normal; the prophecy speaks of my taking a ‘division of the heart’ that will enable me to defeat Voldemort, and I think that he may interpret that as the death of someone close. So he may avoid trying to hurt them, in case he gives me that division. But I can’t be entirely sure he’ll interpret the prophecy that way, and every bit of protection helps.”

“Harry!” Draco all but squawked. “Shouldn’t you be asking your guards to stand at your back?”

Harry gave him a bright smile. "But, Draco, you're important to me," he chirped. "And I can protect myself better with my magic than you can with your own powers."

Draco gave him a glare. Michael took the opportunity to study his profile. Harry swallowed another chuckle, and looked back at Owen.

"There's one thing we'll have to settle after the battle, though," he said. "If Midsummer does defang Voldemort, the way I hope it will, and make him less of a problem for months or even years, then we have to give you a more regular role in my life than just bodyguards. Where I intend to spend the rest of my summer—well, I think I may take Draco and Professor Snape with me, but probably no one else. So think about that, please."

"We will," said Owen, snapping his fingers under his twin's nose to get his attention. "Thank you for giving us a place in the battle, Harry."

Harry nodded, trying to convince himself that Owen's tone held only the usual gratitude, and nothing worshipful or slavish, which would have been unbearable. "You're welcome."

Owen and Michael turned back to their own room then, and Harry and Draco made their way to the Owlery. Draco at least went on complaining about the bodyguards instead of getting his birthday gift, which Harry found a relieving change of subject.

Indigena spat dust out of her mouth, and then paused to shake dirt out of her hair. A moment later, she wondered why she'd bothered. More dirt fell into it from the roof of the tunnel.

I hate being this far underground, she thought, even as she stroked the vine that had dug the tunnel through the dirt and let her get this far. A second vine had extended beside it and widened the passage enough for Indigena to crawl through, but had retreated so she could fit in. And now they were about to head into unknown territory, the concrete and heavy stone there was no choice but to bore straight through.

This was heavy business, and dirtier than she had imagined, breaking into Tullianum from beneath to rescue the Death Eaters imprisoned there. It meant she didn't have to attend the Death Eater meeting tonight, though, as the others tugged in their new recruits and initiated them. Indigena had had enough of killing and torture from hearing her Lord talk of it.

She took a deep breath and touched the vine again. It rustled obediently. Indigena felt a smile of pleasure and love light her face, and didn't conceal it. Why should she? They were alone here, and ahead of them was a task that only they could do.

She leaned against the vine and closed her eyes. "Ready, my love?" she murmured. "For the final push?"

The tendrils, dark green veined with black, that she'd dreamed of and bred and created curled around her in answer. Indigena wrapped herself close, the plants beneath her skin flexing towards the outside. They would give her the ability to ride with her vine upwards and not be smashed. Indigena's body hadn't been fully human for years. She'd never regretted implanting the vines, leaves, and flowers that she had; they bounced most spells, disguised her when she needed to be disguised, and shielded her in moments like this. It only saddened her that most other people looked askance at her for it.

"Now," she whispered.

The vine struck upwards. Indigena felt the grinding shock when it hit stone. She closed her eyes and hung on, riding every wave as it again and again. Tendrils writhed over her head, seeking out tiny cracks in the solid material, probing always towards the presence of greater warmth and light overhead. Tullianum was their sun, and they were the long-buried seeds rising to meet it.

How great a force this is, Indigena thought, as the stones above her ground and shifted apart. The force of green and growing things, which drives a flower through inches of soil when the spring comes, which sends sap pumping up through trees like a heartbeat, which makes the first seeds return in months to an area blasted by fire or magic. And everyone else underestimates it.

The vine was tiring. It reached out to her, and Indigena bled her magic into it, pumping it full of the power that meant more to a creation like this than sap or blood. It surged again, and she held it, warmth and sleek life shifting beneath her, primal as muscle.

Ram. Ram. Ram.

She didn't know how long it took. She didn't know how much blood she shed as broken chunks of stone and concrete rasped against her skin. All she knew was the single, driven purpose, the will, that she was giving both herself and the plant. She was a strong witch. She chose to do something, and it got done. On and on they rose.

Indigena wasn't surprised to feel blasts from wands striking at the creeping tendrils that had already made it through Tullianum's floor. The Aurors would be trying to destroy her beauty before it could get far. But they were utterly inexperienced with magic like this. They didn't understand the insane determination that powered it, either the vine's or her own.

Indigena reached deeper into her own magic, and it answered her, reaching and grasping and whipping. Indigena knew Aurors were flying as the tendrils grabbed them, though she could not hear the sounds of their bodies smashing from down here, and only faintly feel the trickle of blood across leaves. Down here, it was peaceful.

The tendrils crawled on, racing and sniffing over the stone, seeking out those cells where people with the Dark Mark resided. Indigena felt herself smiling as the flowers she'd made for just this purpose turned back and forth, flagging out the smell of her Lord. The Mark on her own arm pulsed in recognition, and the vine lashed forward, driving through the doors, or grasping them and wrenching them off their hinges.

They flooded free, Death Eaters captured last year and Death Eaters captured this year, and Indigena sent up the massive arms of the plant, calling up three times her old strength so that they could tear open holes in the floor, and then withdrawing them. Most of the Dark Lord's servants didn't hesitate, dropping into the holes and sliding

rapidly downwards. All the holes would lead to the massive tunnel Indigena and the vine had come through, in the end, and that would lead them to a spot on the outskirts of London where they would be able to Apparate to the Dark Lord's side. Since he would be calling, most of them should be able to reach him even without their wands.

And as for their wands...well, the Dark Lord had sent Karkaroff to kidnap a certain wand maker, who would create new weapons for his loyal servants.

Indigena waited until she was sure that no one with a Dark Mark was left in Tullianum prison. The Aurors had retreated and gone for help, or were dead. She pulled back the arms of the vine, reluctantly, and slid down the tunnel and into the dirt one where the Death Eaters waited.

A heavysset man, who fit her Lord's description of Walden Macnair, looked at her with a faint smile. "And you're a Yaxley of Thornhall," he said.

It was hard to remember human speech for a moment, but Indigena nodded. "Come to rescue you," she said, pulling up her left robe sleeve to reveal the Dark Mark. "We join our Lord for an assault on Hogwarts at Midsummer."

Macnair laughed, and his eyes shone. "That is what I like to hear," he said, and helped her lead the others back down the tunnel. Harry winced at the sight of the Daily Prophet headline the next day.

DEATH EATERS BREAK OUT OF TULLIANUM; TEN AURORS KILLED

He read the story, but the headline had encapsulated it, really. Immense vines of a kind that no one had seen before had dug up into the prison and dragged open the cells of those who carried Dark Marks. They had also killed every Auror that fired curses at them, until the remaining ones had run. Scrimgeour was quoted saying that he considered this a terrible tragedy and would reinforce the prison with new spells against any attack from beneath.

Harry suffered a momentary pang of guilt. Should I have anticipated that Indigena Yaxley would do that?

Maybe he should have, though he hadn't known she could create vines that would dig through stone. The ground around Hogwarts was dirt, and it was no real surprise that she'd been able to bore through that. But this...

Lucius told me she was dangerous, Harry thought, eating his eggs without putting down the newspaper, which hovered in front of him thanks to a Levitation Charm. I had no idea how right he was.

"Harry? Can I have my gift now? You haven't even wished me Happy Birthday yet!"

Harry looked up with a faint groan. Draco was sitting down on the other side of him, and he obviously hadn't seen the Daily Prophet headline. He looked under his plates as if searching for his gift there, then fixed Harry with an expectant gaze.

Harry grimaced and shook out the paper so that he could see it. Draco lost his smile.

"Voldemort did that?" he breathed.

Harry nodded. "With the help of Indigena Yaxley. They certainly didn't plan their escape themselves." If they had, he thought, as he turned to his breakfast while Draco read, then I would be contacting Scrimgeour in hysteria over my parents potentially breaking free.

"I—I can't believe this happened," Draco whispered. "You'd think the Ministry would have had wards under Tullianum."

"Under Tullianum?" Harry snorted. "Why should they have? It's underground—far underground, with solid stone beneath it. A prisoner could only do something about it if they had their wand or could do wandless magic, and the wards should have taken care of both those problems. They weren't going to waste magic on what seemed secure. There would have been an outcry against them for

that, just as there will be for this.” He lapsed into brooding, wondering what Scrimgeour was doing at the moment, and convinced that he needed to send letters to his allies now, with the exception of Henrietta, asking them to come to the school and aid him in the Midsummer battle.

“Well, they’ll have wards there now,” Draco muttered, as he finished reading the article. He folded it neatly and tucked it away, then turned back to Harry. “And none of that excuses you from wishing me a happy birthday, or giving me a gift as soon as possible.”

Harry smiled faintly, and tried to pull his mind back to matters that he thought of as minor in comparison with how Voldemort might use the escaped Death Eaters. “It’s in our bedroom, Draco,” he said. “Do you want to go back and get it now, or wait until lunch?”

Draco bit his lip. “Why couldn’t you have brought it to breakfast with you?” He was spooning food onto his plate, though, obviously unwilling to go without breakfast so that he could see his gift. “Or why can’t you Summon it now?”

“Because it was too big for me to carry in my arms.”

Draco flushed with excitement, and all but bounced in place on his seat. “That should be brilliant, then,” he said. “I’ll come back with you to the bedroom at lunch.” He gave Harry a stern look. “And it should be worth waiting for.”

Harry gave a weak smile. He did hope Draco would like his gift, but he wasn’t entirely sure he would. Well, that worry had just faded and shriveled in the wake of his worry about Tullianum.

“You realize what this could mean, Rufus.” Amelia’s voice was quiet, but inflexible. She probably kept it that low just so he wouldn’t hear the gloating in it, Rufus thought sourly. She had lost to him on the issue of giving werewolves Portkeys to Tullianum, but she was going to win this struggle.

She sat in front of the desk in his office, and so did several other Elders of the Wizengamot, hastily summoned just after Rufus

received a firecall informing him of the prisoners' escape. The rest of them looked as victorious as Amelia. They were starting to feel his strength for the first time, Rufus thought, and few Wizengamot Elders liked being bridled by the Minister. Cornelius's weakness had spoiled them further, and made them think it the natural state of affairs, that the Wizengamot should direct the future course of the Ministry.

"I do, Amelia," said Rufus, leaning back and letting his eyes survey all of them at once. He could hear Percy Weasley's nervous shuffling behind him, and spared a thought to wish the boy would calm down. "It means that we can no longer count on Tullianum as secure. And the Death Eaters are going to swell You-Know-Who's forces when they go back to him."

Amelia laughed quietly. "It's more than that, Rufus," she said.

There's a danger here that I didn't foresee, then. Rufus believed he had kept a reasonable handle on the formation of coalitions in the Wizengamot to oppose him, and had just as subtly undermined them. This one, though, he hadn't noticed. None of the Elders in the room was as close to Amelia as Emily Gillyflower had been. That bothered Rufus. What's their common bond? What cause do they share?

"In what way?" he asked, playing dumb. "Have you received more news on You-Know-Who's activities that I'm unaware of?"

One of the other Elders, a pompous idiot named Nasturtian whom Rufus had never liked, snorted. "You're perfectly aware of these activities, aren't you, Rufus?" he asked. "Seeing as how that young halfblood's published an article recently supporting werewolves' rights, and you did the same thing?"

"It was hardly an article," said Rufus. "It was an interview in the Prophet, and I believe I alleged that werewolves were dangerous creatures, as well." Inwardly, he cursed. He'd made it look as if Harry controlled him, or at least as if someone could make a good case that he did.

“You alleged,” said Amelia. “But I don’t think that you really mean it, Rufus. And now this escape from Tullianum. One might think that you could be a bit more prepared.”

Rufus ground his teeth as he watched her eyes. He and Amelia had been friends and colleagues for years, and then Emily had been bitten. Now Amelia was acting out of fear and guilt and rage at the way she felt compelled to abandon her friend. Rufus understood why she was pressing him so hard, using any excuse to worm her way back to the werewolf issue, but he hated it nonetheless.

“More prepared?” he asked, with a faint frown that concealed the speed of his thoughts.

“Yes, prepared.” Amelia leaned forward. “And so, of course, Rufus, we have to ask each other if we really want an unprepared Minister in a time of war. Of course we can’t have one who can’t meet the challenges. Poor Cornelius wouldn’t have stood the test. We had to vote him out. And, well, of course it’s too early yet to say if you really don’t have what it takes, but we would hate to find out that you don’t. Some more preparation would not go awry.” Her face was all anxious helpfulness.

Rufus heard the threat behind her words. We enacted a vote of no confidence on Fudge. We can do the same to you, if you get too troublesome.

And he had been, he realized now, with a blast of self-blame. He had not realized how deep and entrenched the hatred of werewolves was, how panicked the Wizengamot was in the wake of that bite, and how little it would take to tip the balance against him. With this escape, the rest of the Elders might accept the spin that Amelia was hinting she could put on it—that the escape was the fault of an incompetent Minister who let a fifteen-year-old boy tell him what to do. Being seen as in the pocket of Harry would help him no more than it had helped Fudge to be seen as in the pocket of Augustus Starrise.

They would vote him down in a panic, and accept the next and strongest candidate who appeared—almost certainly Amelia herself.

If he stepped wrong now, he stood the chance of losing everything.

Rufus had played the game of politics for most of the last sixteen years. This was his own fault for forgetting some of its fundamental lessons. Harry was able to forget them, but, well, Harry had Lord-level power, a diverse gathering of allies, and a responsibility to fewer people than Rufus did, ultimately. Rufus had his mind, and that was close to it, particularly with the deaths last night. Ten fine Aurors had fallen, and that included comrades who would have done their best to support him against unfair pressure from various portions of the Ministry.

Time to retreat and regroup.

"I am no one's pawn," he said now, his voice mild. "I had not realized that the perception had occurred. Of course a Minister must be strong in a time of war, Amelia, and Cornelius would never have done." He met her eyes and held them. "I intend to do."

She got the message. They'd danced with each other too long for her to ignore it. She smiled and nodded. "Good, Rufus. Really, that's all we wanted to know." She stood and extended her hand across the desk to him. "I need to go back to the Department and see to my people. We've lost so many..." And she let him catch a glimpse of her genuine grief, as a kind of reward.

Rufus shook back, accepting the grief with a slight nod. He would withdraw some of his vocal support for werewolves, modify his stance, in return for Amelia and her coalition not spinning this escape from Tullianum the way they could have. He disliked the practice, but there was much to dislike in politics, and if he had had the rarified sensibilities of a Gryffindor, he would have got out of the game a long time ago.

He waited until Amelia and the other Elders were out the door, and then turned to Percy. "I want you to write to Harry," he said. "They'll be watching my post for the next few days, so it can't come directly from me."

“What should it say?” Percy whispered. His face was pinched, outraged, and very nearly white. Rufus knew he had followed the contortions of the confrontation well enough to understand what they were up against.

“The details of what happened here,” said Rufus. “The motivations.” He smiled thinly. Harry would probably still be angry with him for backing off his public support for the werewolves, but, well, Rufus had moved too quickly on that. Time to back off, circle, and attack from another direction.

And he would do it by speaking to someone few if any of his opponents would expect to be helpful.

He rose to his feet. “If anyone needs me,” he told Percy, “I’ll be in Tullianum for the next little while, inspecting the damage. And after that will have to come a press conference with the Daily Prophet, I suppose, which can translate into an article illustrated with brave photographs of me inspecting the damage.”

He swept off, wondering if anyone would realize the other reason he wanted to visit the prison. Former Death Eaters and deranged Light Lords were hardly the only prisoners held there. There was also a certain werewolf, who had given out gnomish utterances so far. Rufus would see what he would say when faced with the Minister himself. Harry had a sheaf of letters clutched in his hand when he met Draco at the door to the Slytherin common room after their morning consultations on future classes with their Head of House. His face was pale, taut, and determined, and Draco wished irritably that Voldemort hadn’t chosen last night to break his Death Eaters free. Then Harry would be able to concentrate solely on his birthday, and not on politics.

“What is it?” he demanded, when they arrived in the bedroom, he looked around, and he still saw nothing large, valuable, and obviously for him.

Harry blinked for a moment, as though he’d forgotten what they came for, and then smiled thinly. “Oh, yes,” he muttered, and laid the letters

on his bed while he reached under it. Draco heard him mutter, “Finite Incantatem!” and then he was pulling at folds of cloth, which rolled under his hand as he dragged them out.

Draco gaped. He had no idea how Harry had managed to get something so large under his bed without Draco noticing.

Then he thought, He’s a Lord-level wizard, you fool, and shook his head, paying attention to the gift as Harry unrolled it before him.

“Happy birthday, Draco,” he murmured.

Draco blinked. It was a tapestry, a dark blue one. It was also a very good likeness of himself, standing with a cloak in the Malfoy colors hanging from his shoulders and his hands resting easily on his left hip and his wand, in the middle of a circle of moon signs, quartered at his hands, feet, and head with symbols. The one at his right hand was a stalking lion, the one at his feet a skull, the one at his left hand a barren tree, and the last, above his head, three stars surrounding a dark space in the center. Draco saw the stars were brighter than the rest, glowing as if on fire.

“What does it represent?” he asked, almost ashamed to admit he didn’t know. His eyes went back to the eyes of his woven image. They were mesmerizing, and as if he had modeled for the weaving himself.

“Our courting ritual,” said Harry. He nodded at the lion. “That’s for my birthday, or the first of August—the constellation Leo. The skull’s for Halloween, obviously. The barren tree represents Imbolc, which comes in February. And the stars are—”

“Walpurgis,” Draco finished, reaching down to trace the symbol above his head. The threads shimmered with living heat against his skin. He shook his head in wonder. “And each of the symbols will brighten as we complete the courting ritual for that particular date?”

“Exactly,” said Harry. He gave a small smile at Draco’s stare. “I did pay attention to what you told me about the ritual, Draco, even if I didn’t read as much on it as you did. And I contacted a weaver in

London that same week, giving her a detailed description of you. This has been a long time in the weaving, but I wanted to show you that I take this seriously.”

Draco slowly shook his head. “I had no idea, Harry—“

“Well, it wouldn’t have been much of a surprise if you had an idea, now would it?” Harry softened his words by letting the tapestry slip out of his arms to the floor, and stepping over it to kiss Draco solidly. “Happy birthday. I am sorry that I’ve been distracted, but this makes the Midsummer battle all the more worrying. It means we’ll probably get all the Death Eaters in one place, which I’m pleased about, but—“ Harry shrugged.

Draco put his arms around Harry and leaned his head on his shoulder for a moment, still watching his woven image. He decided that he might as well give Harry his own gift. “Do you know,” he muttered to Harry, “I managed to possess Snape last night.”

Harry jerked back in startlement and stared at him. “You did? I—that’s wonderful, Draco. But are you sure that he wasn’t just letting you do it to tease you about it later?”

Draco snickered. “No. I made him give a horribly-written Hufflepuff exam a good mark. Then I lingered in the back of his mind to see if he remembered and corrected it. He never did. And this morning, I heard a Hufflepuff squealing about her high mark in Potions.”

Harry looked torn between laughter and worry. “That comes close to a violation of his free will, Draco,” he murmured.

Draco concealed a sigh. It’s a good thing he has people around him who worry less about ethics than he does. “I think it’s a pretty small violation in the scheme of things, Harry,” he said. “And it proves that I can possess a Legilimens. That part of the Midsummer battle will work.”

“I hope so,” said Harry, and his face grew pale again as he looked at the letters on the bed. “I should send these.”

Draco stepped back, and let Harry go to the Owlery. Then he sat back and looked at the tapestry of himself for a time. He noticed that the second full moon sign past Walpurgis, the one that probably stood for June, glimmered just a little brighter than the rest of them. The tapestry marked the passage of ordinary time, too.

One thing about his depiction stayed with him as he gazed.

Harry made me more beautiful than I actually am.

Done.

Snape stepped back, and then prowled slowly around his cauldron. The potion within glimmered silver. It smelled like fresh, raw meat and blood. It would attract many werewolves, especially those running mad in their beast forms without a sane idea in their heads.

And it would poison them the next time their bodies changed from human to wolf. The lengthening of the bones would call out a venom like acid, deeply painful, feasting on their marrow. The alteration of their flesh and muscle would inspire the composition of their blood to change as well, until it burned them. And the last stages of the transformation would trigger the emotional poison, drowning their minds in despair and inspiring them to bite themselves until they died. Because a werewolf was made to withstand enormous amounts of magical damage, the poison would take a long time to work.

If he ever used it.

He had promised Harry that he would not.

Snape stopped and stared down into the potion, well-aware that it cast a faint silver light that glimmered on his face and perhaps made him look slightly mad.

He had created this poison solely to work out his hatred and his fear. He would feel safer to have this on hand, even though he would never use it.

No. Never.

Of course, there was one problem: the hatred and fear hadn't gone away. In fact, they coiled in the back of his mind, poisoning him, making him wake from sudden dreams of gleaming teeth and loping bodies and hot breath, and causing him to start at a casual mention of the full moon.

But he would never use it, because he had promised Harry.

He filled vials with the potion before it could cool into uselessness, set Warming Charms on them, and took them over to a cabinet on the far wall. He pushed them to the back of the highest shelf, then closed the cabinet and put the strongest locking spells on it that he knew.

He wasn't going to touch them. He wasn't going to use them.

They were just going to be there.

Interlude: The Serpent Bites

June 6th, 1996

Dear Lord Voldemort:

I write this in haste, and yet out of a desire to be as complete as possible. I also shed some of the conventions that have guarded our speech before this. I ask that you forgive me. Since I will use the incantation to send this directly to you, I think there is little chance of any of our enemies seeing it.

Potter has just sent me a letter in which he asks for my help at Midsummer. It is addressed Dear my ally rather than with my name. I fear that means he has sent his other allies letters, asking for their help, and has merely scribed the same words several dozen times. He may have excluded those he does not trust completely, but the fact that he is writing me suggests his scope of trust has widened. It is possible that many powerful wizards and witches could face you at Hogwarts on Midsummer.

I am unsure how much you know about this already, my Lord, so forgive me if I repeat information you already hold. Potter's letter stresses that he expects the battle on Midsummer to be difficult and long, and he expressly calls it a battle, rather than merely a skirmish, or a confrontation or duel between the two of you. He assures us that he has plans in place, which he will explain when we meet him in person. We will be meeting inside Hogwarts, and he has confidence in the strength of its wards. He ends his letter with the words, "With your help, I plan to defang Voldemort." I will send a copy of the letter along with this message, in case you wish to see it yourself.

Burke was a fool, a convenient prop to take my fall. When I found copies of his 'Serpent' letter, I adopted his pseudonym and wrote to you as him, though I knew you would notice the difference in handwriting when you broke the concealment charms. I was not, then, ready to declare my allegiance. Now I am. What Potter plans is mad. He cannot face the most powerful Dark wizard in the world in open battle and survive, however many allies stand with him. And especially since the escape of your loyal servants from Tullianum, my

Lord, I know that you protect those who serve you, and draw them back to you.

I ask you now only what you think I should do. Should I come to you and take the Mark? Or should I answer Potter's letter and remain in his counsels as a spy to give you what information I can? It will be too dangerous to send letters from the castle, if you prefer the latter course, but I may use the spell that bends winds inside out to carry Potter's plans to you. Only tell me, my Lord, and you will have my obedience and my faith.

The Serpent.

June 6th, 1996

My Dearest Serpent:

Ah, I do so prefer it when you write with your left hand! You are right, Burke was a fool. And he did not even realize that the information he passed was of little use, or that he would inevitably be found out while carrying the Mark. You have proven more useful in both your letters.

For now, our Lord—and all honor to his name—wishes you to answer Harry's letter, and go to Hogwarts. It is best that you go as soon as possible. Harry will not confine his plans to one day or one hour or one meeting. The Dark Lord wishes to begin hearing them immediately.

If you are close enough to cause trouble and inconvenience to Harry and his allies, then do so. No killing—not yet. It would reveal you in such a close environment as Hogwarts is, and our Lord has particular reason for not wanting Harry's adoptive father, brother, or partner touched. Remain in the background, and stay ready to bite, like the serpent coiled at the breast that you are.

I think we shall be seeing each other very soon.

Regards,

Indigena Yaxley.

Chapter Eighty-Seven: End of Innocence

Minerva sat back in her seat and watched her students with a faint smile. Another year ended, and despite the battle with Voldemort lurking ahead—a battle in which she would get to participate, this time—the most important thing to her was that her students had survived to the end, and found some joy along the way.

And they had done it under someone who had not known she would be Headmistress until June of last year. Really, Minerva thought she deserved some congratulations.

She shot a glance along the staff table, taking in the faces of both professors and their guests. Severus, of course, was silent as he stared at his food. He had grown both more brooding, and more hateful when he did speak, since the werewolf attack on Hogwarts's grounds. Minerva tipped a heap of beans onto his plate. The glare he shot her made her glad that she'd known him for twenty years, so she'd had a chance to get used to it.

"Eat your beans, Severus," she said, and looked at other people as if it didn't matter to her whether he did.

Sybill was chattering some nonsense at Acies, of course. The Defense teacher never paid attention to her, and Sybill never noticed that she didn't, making them perfect dinner companions. Behind them, Rubeus carefully handled his knife and fork, as though afraid he would crush them. Pomona, a year-long veteran of sitting at his side, ducked his elbows occasionally as she munched her way steadily through a plate of shepherd's pie. Filius was conversing with Peter, who answered his questions about using rats in duels with amused patience.

Others of Harry's allies who had answered his plea for help yesterday were there as well—Belville, Rhangnara, Pemberley, Apollonis, Rosier-Henlin, Parkinson, Bulstrode. Minerva had been uneasy about letting a woman she knew was a werewolf into the school, until she saw that Hawthorn wore a silver necklace at her throat, and Harry had explained to her that she'd never spent time with Loki or cared

about his goals. She was here to protect Harry and her daughter. That, Minerva could easily agree with.

She looked back at Severus's plate, and saw him Transfiguring his beans into cockroaches, which marched under the table and got into Sybill's robes.

"Severus," she said.

He gave her a flat stare, Transfigured the last bean, and then sat back. His gaze was haunted as it roamed the walls. Minerva ate a few beans of her own while she thought about that. He had grown increasingly restive since yesterday evening, when the first of Harry's allies arrived and she lowered the wards to accommodate them. But she had tightened them again at once, after making sure the wards understood who they were. Severus surely could not be worried about how well-protected he was here.

"Severus," she said, making sure her voice was gentle, not mocking, and that she held his eyes when he looked at her. "What is it?"

He shut his eyes and sat still for a long moment. Lines of weariness sagged around his face. Minerva frowned. How did I not notice those? He looks as if he has had many sleepless nights.

"I am afraid, Minerva," he said, hissing out that word as if it were an embarrassing sexual disease. "Is that what you wished to hear? Do you truly want to know how little I look forward to going into battle here, or having Harry do it for me?"

"The only students who will remain until Midsummer have their parents' permission to fight in the battle, and they've been improving as duelists under Alastor's tutelage," said Minerva, looking towards the end of the table where the old Auror sat. He was engaged in an argument with Rhangnara, setting out his cutlery to resemble the position of soldiers. Minerva shook her head in amusement. "And this time, Harry is choosing the ground, and has a great many allies at his back. Don't worry, Severus. In one way, this is madness, drawing Voldemort to Hogwarts. But he never tried to attack a target so strong

and well-defended during the First War. He'll have a hard time taking us, and would even if we didn't have Harry with us."

"It is still risky," Severus whispered. "I still wish that we were drawing him anywhere but here."

Minerva patted his hand. "I know, Severus. Most of the time, events happen so quickly around Harry that it's hard to take stock of them before they're over. But this time, there are others with you to see your child go into battle, and even other parents to share your worries with." She looked down at the Hufflepuff table, where Mrs. Smith sat with her son, Zacharias, and conversed with him. Most of the students near her watched with awed eyes.

"My child?"

Severus was actually spluttering. Minerva concealed her smile as she looked at him and said, "Well, Severus, if he isn't your son, what would you call him?"

"He—I—"

Minerva shook her head and rose to her feet. The students were at once silent, gazing expectantly at her. Minerva saw more than one tight grin of anticipation at the Slytherin table, especially on the faces of the first-years. It was a good thing that some of them were children still, she thought, and worried more about tiny school matters than about war.

"As with the end of every year," she said, "there comes the presentation of the House Cup. In fourth place, with two hundred seventy-six points, is Ravenclaw House."

Polite applause echoed through the Great Hall. Filius's House ducked their heads and muttered something. Ravenclaw never had really recovered from the vicious point-taking it had received after the other professors discovered that the majority of the students hexing Harry had come from that House; Filius himself had reduced their points to zero when he realized just how many people had realized they were learning Dark Arts but hadn't approached him. There was a limit to

how much Dumbledore's spell could excuse them, he said sternly when Minerva asked him about it. They had done well to earn this many points back.

"In third place, with three hundred seven points, Gryffindor House."

Again, more polite applause. Minerva allowed herself a moment of pure, indulgent House pride as she gazed at her lions. They had tried, incredibly hard, especially after she had cast Remus out and they no longer had a true Head to give them points. But they had fallen short of Hufflepuff thanks to the antics of the Weasley twins, among others. Minerva had to admit she was looking forward to seeing the twins leave after the Midsummer battle. Now that they had the thousand Galleons they'd received from Harry, they could do something actually productive in the world, as well as plague someone else.

"In second place, with three hundred eighteen points, Hufflepuff House."

Loud cheering from Pomona's House, which hadn't got that many points in some time. Mrs. Smith gave her son a glance, and Zacharias dropped his hands from applauding and shut his mouth. It comforted Minerva to know there was at least one person in the world who could control him.

"And in first place, and the winners of the House Cup with three hundred ninety points, Slytherin House."

She waved her wand, and the banners along the walls turned green, while Severus's House indulged in self-congratulatory smirks, bowing their heads as the other Houses clapped for them. A pair of first-years hugged each other in excitement, and were dragged apart in moments by Millicent Bulstrode. The lines of worry in Harry's face eased a bit. Minerva hoped he was thinking of things he had done to help his House earn those points, because there had been many.

"And now, enjoy dessert!" Minerva waved her wand again, and the food cleared rapidly from everyone's plates, reappearing as chocolate cake. Most of the students began gulping it down. Minerva sat down and began sampling hers at a more leisurely pace.

A swift glance at Severus revealed that he had a faint smile on his face, a mocking sneer, of course. He glanced at her and said, as sweetly as he was capable of saying anything, "Better luck with the House Cup next year, Minerva."

"Actually," said Minerva, pausing to take a swallow of pumpkin juice, "I don't consider myself Head of Gryffindor any more. Lupin didn't work out, but the person I've hired to take his place will."

"Hired to take his place?" She knew his eyes would be narrow; she hadn't mentioned this before. "And who would that be?"

"Peter Pettigrew," said Minerva comfortably.

Severus choked in a most satisfying manner.

The next day, Harry woke up slowly. He thought about skipping breakfast in the Great Hall. He and the other students staying until Midsummer had no classes, of course, just their dueling lessons and their plans for the battle. No one said that he had to go to the Great Hall on time now.

In the end, though, he decided to venture there. The other students were leaving directly after breakfast, and he wanted to say goodbye to those friends and acquaintances who hadn't received permission to stay, like Ginny, Hermione, and Ron.

He stood and stretched, and that small movement was enough to cause Draco to stir, poking his head through the bed curtains. Harry didn't give him credit for being fully awake yet, though, because he mumbled, "Want company in the loo, Harry?"

"Go back to sleep until your head clears," Harry retorted, and headed for the shower, Argutus draped around his shoulders in dozing coils of silver and white.

He had just turned the shower on when sharp claws raked his right arm. Harry stumbled back in shock, staring down at the cuts. He

watched as they froze over in moments, the ice only growing thicker despite the heat of the water that pounded on them.

When he looked up, the bird with the toothed beak and lizard-like tail was crouching on the far wall of the room, wings fluttering in time to its derisive, jerky laughter.

You haven't learned the truth yet, have you? it asked, and extended one claw, bright with his blood. You haven't learned how to dissolve the bond that links us, and at this point, with every mark you bear, the chance of your learning becomes less and less.

"I thought you said there was no way to dissolve it," said Harry, careful to keep his voice low so that there was less chance of waking Draco and Blaise. "That we were bound no matter what happened. You seemed rather upset about that."

You understand nothing of what has happened. If you knew what I was, you would still reject me, because you are that way. You set harsh limits on yourself. You know nothing of what lies ahead of you, at the end of the dark road. The bird cawed its laughter again, scarlet eyes fastened on his face. And when someone tries to teach you the necessary lessons, you shrink into yourself and lash out. You are weak. That shall be your downfall.

Harry didn't see the worth of responding. He looked at the cuts on his arm again. Like the others, they were parallel claw marks, a few inches apart, and the numbing cold from them hurt worse than the pain and had already frozen the blood. They would have icy scabs for a time, but the scabs would heal and fall off. Argutus, shifting on his shoulders, didn't even seem concerned about them, but then, Harry didn't think Argutus could see the bird.

Weakness, and limitations, and the end of the dark road, the bird told him, and then raised its wings and flew across the loo at his head. As Harry ducked to avoid it, it vanished, breaking apart as if the water were the sun and it were mist.

Harry shivered and ran his clawed arm under warm water to somewhat take away the sting. He didn't think it was worth listening

to what the bird babbled about. For all he knew, this was some trick of Voldemort's, come to coax him into relaxing the bindings on his magic, so that Harry himself would be swallowed up by the Dark and violent parts of his power.

"But where do you think she is?"

"I don't know, Draco," Harry snapped absently as he crossed the Great Hall to the Gryffindor table with his boyfriend beside him. "Maybe she didn't feel well, or maybe she decided to enjoy the first day of summer holidays and sleep in. It's not that unusual for Pansy to miss breakfast, you know."

Draco didn't look satisfied, but just then Owen moved up to Harry's side, and he actually growled and tried to shove him away. Harry caught Draco's hand and Owen's amused eye, and shook his head at both of them.

"Was there something you wanted, Owen?"

"Yes," said Owen. "I wanted to know if you'd like us to show some of the Dark Arts we learned at Durmstrang to the dueling club."

Harry hesitated. He could well imagine that Moody wouldn't like it, but they could do it when Moody wasn't there; he preferred to split the dueling club into halves now, working with the less successful students and leaving the better ones to Harry. Owen and Michael would be able to demonstrate to their heart's content in front of people like Cho and Zacharias, who wouldn't breathe a word to Moody.

"All right," Harry muttered. "But make sure no word of this gets back to Auror Moody."

Owen and Michael nodded and shivered simultaneously. Harry smiled at them, dropped Draco's hand, and turned just in time to receive a bone-crushing hug from Hermione.

"Don't you dare die," she whispered to him. Harry didn't think she would have been quite as affectionate if he hadn't been going to

battle, but, after all, he was, and her parents hadn't let her stay to see it. "It wouldn't be fair, or right. You have so much still to do."

Harry gently patted her back. "I won't, Hermione," he said. "I'll do my best to survive, just for you."

She sniffled once and hugged him harder, then let him go and turned to Draco. "I suppose that goes for you too, Malfoy," she said. Her voice was perfectly ungracious, but a faint smile tugged at her lips.

"So glad to have your good opinion, Granger," said Draco, but he inclined his head to her, though he wore no matching smile.

Harry turned to receive a handshake from Ron and a half-hug from Ginny. "I wish Mum had let us stay," said Ron, frowning. "But she said that the twins were old enough to risk their lives, and we weren't." Resentment curdled his voice for just a moment before he brightened and recovered. "Be sure to tell us all about the battle in letters, mate, all right?"

Ginny nodded fervently, though her eyes, aimed over Harry's shoulder, were scanning the room for Blaise. "I want to know how all the spells from our club got used," she told Harry.

"I promise I'll remember," said Harry. It was amazing how easy it was to laugh and joke with people who wouldn't be here to see Midsummer, he thought, while he could hardly speak of anything but deeply serious strategy to the people who would stay.

"Good." Ginny gave him a second nod, and then went in search of her boyfriend. Harry turned to say goodbye to Neville. His grandmother had considered giving him permission to stay, but in the end had decided that she would rather have her grandson beside her.

Neville flushed with pleasure when Harry reminded him about his promise to find a counter for Indigena Yaxley's plants. "I'll send you the seedlings as soon as I have a viable plant, Harry," he said, his eyes glinting with excitement. "I'm not far from breeding one to counter the vines that stop wandless magic, I think."

“Good for you, Neville!” Harry said, and his ears flushed even more.

Harry turned away to bid farewell to the others, telling himself he could relax and ignore other pressing duties until noon. When he was done here, he intended to go up to the Astronomy Tower and watch the carriages that would bear them to the Hogsmeade Station safely out of sight.

“I think I can see Neville,” Harry said, leaning forward and putting his hand over his eyes. Draco tugged him back from the edge of the Tower—not gently. Owen and Michael, who’d accompanied them there, had stirred uneasily, but they settled back when Draco pulled on Harry’s robe. Harry supposed he was making them nervous, but he didn’t really see why. It wasn’t as though a wind were blowing, and the eastern sky behind them gleamed with the colors of the Light’s blessing on their coming battle.

“You can’t see Longbottom,” snorted Draco. “With those weak eyes of yours, Harry? It’s a miracle you see the Snitch.”

Harry ignored him, watching the carriages as they trundled onwards. He could see the thestrals that pulled them, and so, he guessed, could everyone else on the Tower with them. He wondered idly what the students inside the carriages who’d never witnessed a death thought. Didn’t they ever get curious about what made the vehicles move? Of course, they probably just assumed it was magic.

It was a glorious June morning, with the sun sparkling off the lake’s water and the dew on the grass and several thousand other things that Harry wouldn’t have imagined it could find an excuse to sparkle off. Harry experienced a moment of pure longing that he wasn’t in one of those carriages, going home to an ordinary family who loved him, laughing and joking with his brother, and perhaps trying to play a swift game of Exploding Snap before they arrived at the station.

Then he told himself firmly not to be an idiot. What he had wasn’t the destiny he would have chosen, but there were much worse ones.

“Come on, Harry,” Draco said. “I’m bored.”

Harry lingered a moment longer, though, determined to watch the carriages out of sight. The lead one hadn't gone far yet, just passing the edge of the lake.

He felt the moment when the wards vanished, the magic sucked out of them. He jerked up straight, his heart so loud in his ears that the sound of it hurt. That cannot mean what I think it means. It cannot—

And then the Death Eaters came out of the Forbidden Forest.

Harry thought he screamed. Draco grabbed his arm, and Owen and Michael grabbed his cloak, as if to hold him back from diving off the Tower. Harry knew he was fighting them, filled with conflicting impulses—to summon his Firebolt and get down there, to warn McGonagall, to shout until all the professors realized what was going on and spilled forth from the castle—

And then it was already too late. The first Death Eaters had aimed their wands and cried out the Killing Curse, and blasts of green light struck the first carriage. Harry heard a terrified scream that cut off in mid-note. Someone was dead.

The Death Eaters were running with their cloaks billowing behind them. They wrenched open the doors of the carriage and dragged bodies, two of them, small enough to be second-years, out of it. Then they manhandled the two struggling, shrieking survivors to the ground. More Death Eaters were coming out of the Forest, aiming their wands in curses that worked to stop the coaches and send the thestrals rearing and tossing their heads. Screams shattered the morning.

Harry's magic flared out of control. He used it to tear free of the grip of all three people holding him, and ran for the stairs down from the Astronomy Tower. The same thing was happening that had happened in the Forbidden Forest, that had happened in the woods where the magic had taken them for Walpurgis Night and let them hunt a white stag; the stones yielded in front of him, walls turned to misty remembrances of themselves, and he ran more quickly than anything mortal possibly could have.

He was calling even as he ran, intoning the Summoning Charm in his head again and again, and halfway down the stairs, his Firebolt met him. Harry swung his leg over it, and in a moment he was zipping down the stairs faster than his feet could ever have taken him, hunched small on the broom so as not to bump into anyone who might be pounding up or down the stairs in search of him.

There came the moment when Voldemort did something more than swallow the wards. His magic felt like a vast, dark, rearing wave, clouding half the sky. Harry felt him begin to swallow the magic from those students the Death Eaters had captured, and even through the stone, their cries seemed to reach him.

Harry reached the doors of the entrance hall at last, and blasted outward. The wards that McGonagall had put around the castle itself sparkled ahead of him, tightening as they tried to insure that no enemies could reach Hogwarts. Harry, not without regret, threw his magic forward, tearing a hole that he closed behind him when he was on the other side, and curled out over the grounds, moving towards the line of carriages and the Death Eaters wrestling students out of them.

Even as he moved, he saw a flare of magic from beside one of the carriages, the first sign of someone fighting back. It was Neville, his rage and fear lending him incredible strength. Harry saw one Death Eater go flying backwards, struck by something that appeared to be a forked lightning bolt. Then Neville turned and tugged the little girl that Death Eater had been holding towards him, shielding her with his body as he began running madly towards the castle.

Other spells struck across the battlefield. Death Eaters were burning with *Ardesco*, and staggering from the gusts of wind that came with *Ventus*. Harry saw Ron leading a troop of younger Gryffindor students back towards Hogwarts, and Ginny, her red hair streaming, staying behind to stand guard for three Ravenclaw first-years, who ran screaming and crying for safety.

“Harry!”

He swung his head. That was Hermione, motioning him frantically towards a carriage that had stopped at the edge of the lake. Harry dived, and caught a glimpse of a startled Death Eater, long blonde hair appearing from under her hood, holding a wand to Luna's temple.

Harry didn't ask himself about right or wrong; he simply lashed out, forming his magic into a snake, and swallowed the Death Eater's magic. She was crying as she staggered and dropped to one knee. Luna stepped away from her, looking vaguely puzzled. Hermione seized her hand and ran for Hogwarts.

Harry kicked back into the sky, half-dizzy with his newly-acquired power, looking around frantically for Voldemort. Dark power roared like a black flame behind him as he swung over the lake, and Harry turned that way.

Merlin knew how he'd assembled them that quickly, but Voldemort was there with a dozen children ranged in front of him, all of them either first-years or extremely small second-years. Harry hovered to a stop as he saw the magic blazing around them. A Dark Arts curse, he knew that, but not one he recognized.

Voldemort laughed softly. He wore no more intimidating garment than a dark cloak, but his magic draped hissing over him like a hundred serpents, and filled the day with an oppression that reminded Harry of Midwinter. His face remained bowed, but, coiled at his feet, a serpent made of stitched-together flesh reared. Its eyes were scarlet, and it stared directly at Harry. Harry knew what Voldemort was using to see, now.

"Such a simple test, Harry," Voldemort crooned. "I know that I cannot kill you until Midsummer, but you could make matters much simpler if you came to me and yielded yourself now. Your life for these children's, shall we say?" He waved a lazy hand, and the curse around them flared with obscene black life, letting Harry recognize it.

Life-Web. Harry felt his pulse pick up, hammering in his throat. Shit.

The Life-Web would tie up to twenty people together, and put the rein of their combined life-force in the caster's hand. He could will them to

die at any moment, and they would. He could will them pain. He could will them suffering. He could will them to go mad. Harry had encountered mention of it when he was looking up ways to break Ariadne's Web; he thought Voldemort hadn't used it at Durmstrang only because the school was too big.

And it was another spell, like the Fisher King Curse Augustus had used on Adalrico, that could only be broken by the original caster.

"It tempts you, doesn't it, Harry?" Voldemort whispered, and tugged the tendril of black light that ran to his fingers. One girl, a Slytherin first-year whom Harry vaguely recognized, fell, face running with tears, too terrified even to scream. Harry thought her leg was broken. "Your life for theirs. Come closer, come lower, come to me, and I'll dismiss the Life-Web. I'll let them run home to their parents and have a normal life again."

"You're lying," said Harry, but his voice shook, and he could feel his body tingle with his own helplessness. Draco's words rang in his ears, asking what would happen if Voldemort ever tempted him to sacrifice his life for a dozen children he held captive. Would he be able to resist the temptation?

"You can't take that chance, can you?" Voldemort asked, and a boy in Gryffindor robes began to scream and scream, his limbs extending around him as if stretched on an invisible rack. Harry cast a healing spell in his general direction; other magic could still affect victims in a Life-Web, until the caster noticed it and refused to permit it. But Voldemort was obviously watching for anything that would spare the children, and after only a moment of relief, the boy went back to crying out.

Harry reached out sharply, trying to drain the magic that composed the Life-Web. It flared back at him, and flung his absorber abilities away. Voldemort chuckled. "The laws of magic are absolute, Harry," he said. "When they say that this curse cannot be broken except by the one who cast it, that holds true for anything that you might do to try and break it."

Harry became aware of other screams behind him. He had to turn and help the others. He had to protect the people fleeing to the castle. Even if the professors and his allies had come out to help—and he was unsure if McGonagall would be willing to lower the wards for that, what she would decide was the greater danger—there were still too many Death Eaters, over a hundred on the grounds already, and more flooding out of the Forbidden Forest. He had to do things other than hover over Voldemort and make impossible choices about a dozen children in a Life-Web.

But he could not leave them, either.

His vision narrowed to a tiny point, and the broomstick spun dangerously. Harry grabbed and steadied it, and heard Voldemort laugh.

“Well, Harry? What is it to be? What is your choice?”

Harry could attack Voldemort, but that glittering dark power draped over him, augmented by the magic he’d swallowed from Hogwarts students, said he wouldn’t win. And even if he managed, by some miracle, to kill Voldemort, that wouldn’t break the Life-Web. The children would most likely follow him into death, if what Harry remembered from reading about Life-Webs where the caster died was true.

Shouts sounded from behind him. Intermingled among the cries of pain and desperation were equally desperate, equally pained shouts of his name.

The world roared around him, and for every moment that passed while he dithered, someone else got hurt.

He had to choose.

Harry forced his eyes open, and chose.

Other magic could still affect victims in a Life-Web, until the caster noticed it and refused to permit it. Harry struck quickly, therefore, intoning the words in his head as his eyes moved from child to child.

Adsulto cordis. Adsulto cordis. Adsulto cordis.

The Gryffindor boy was the first to stop screaming, as the Heart Attack Spell killed him. Then went the Slytherin girl, whose face smoothed into an expression of blank surprise out of screaming about her broken leg. Then the Hufflepuff girl next to them, falling over without a gasp.

Voldemort, the snake's eyes fixed on Harry, didn't notice what was happening at first, and then he cried out in a mixture of rage and shock. Harry felt his magic shifting, trying to figure out what spell was doing this and block it. He was obviously hindered by his own belief that Harry would never kill anyone when he could rescue them, however, and for long moments the spell was still able to get through.

Harry, his eyes wide, dry, aching, feeling each heartbeat burst in his ears, flare and then die like a firework, hoped he had made the right choice, quick death over endless suffering that would not have ended, he thought, even if he gave himself up, because if he had not made the right choice it was too much to bear, and he killed the last first-year in the Life-Web just as Voldemort caught on to what was happening and moved to will their hearts back to normal. Then he snarled, and his magic rose after Harry like a spitting dragon.

Harry wheeled, sending the Firebolt towards the battlefield, and curving his absorbere gift around him like another Argutus, draping it from his shoulders and letting it swallow the magic of all the Death Eaters it could grab. The ones chasing the children who were running for Hogwarts noticed the difference first, and began to scream themselves, in primal pain and shock. Then Harry was among those who thought something was wrong and swung to look at him, and rapidly ripping away their strength, making it dwindle to nothing, in some cases, and making some wizards almost Squibs in others before they could Apparate away. And all the while, Voldemort's power ravened at his back.

Swollen with new magic, Harry swung around and met Voldemort with a tremendous slap that he thought echoed in the ears of everyone all across Hogwarts's grounds. Harry felt Voldemort reel

back, and followed that with another slap, one that he knew came close to reaching into his enemy's magical core. The sky shook around him, blazing with strange light, and he heard thunder and screaming in his ears.

Voldemort leaned back from him, leery—either of his power or of the prophecy, Harry didn't know—and Harry turned once more, this time using the stolen power to drape over and secure the last run of the last students to Hogwarts. McGonagall had lowered the wards on the castle, after all, and opened the doors of the entrance hall, and Harry could see the professors running out, grabbing students' arms and pulling them inside, casting spells to hinder the few Death Eaters still after them, and repairing the wards again once the students managed to cross to safety. Harry scanned the grounds, saw a witch in a white mask chasing a group of Ravenclaws, and poured his boiling rage down a channel at her. She ceased to exist in the next moment, and the Ravenclaws made it, huddling behind Professor Sprout as she swept them all inside.

Harry did not know how many would have died if he had not turned when he did. He knew exactly how many had died because he had hesitated so long, though. When he faced the carnage, he could count the smaller bodies littered on the ground. Students dead and drained of their magic, and, by the lake, dead because he had chosen to kill them.

The world was spinning gently within his head, and his vision widened and then narrowed again, and his breath came in gasps. He did not know whether he had made the right decision, but he knew one thing.

If I had not chosen to lure him to Hogwarts on Midsummer Day, he would never have come here at all, and they would still be alive.

Guilt piled on top of him until Harry felt the need to bow his shoulders, but he remained hovering instead, staring towards Voldemort. If he intended to launch an attack now, then Harry would have to be ready to meet it.

Instead, Voldemort cast Sonorus, so that everyone in Hogwarts could hear his voice.

“I want Harry Potter,” his voice said, from every corner and every direction. “He is the price for your lives. Each and every one of you will live if you stay in the castle until Midsummer, and then each and every one of you will die if you attempt to shield Harry Potter from me. No one hurts the Lord Voldemort as he has and lives, but Lord Voldemort keeps his promises. You have thirteen days to think on this. Come Midsummer morning, I will attack without mercy.” Then his voice vanished.

Harry waited, but Voldemort was striding back across the battlefield, the flesh-snake slithering beside him from the look of it, and the surviving Death Eaters had retreated into the Forbidden Forest. Harry, his chest heaving, looked at the students’ bodies and wondered if it was safe to recover them.

A moment later, every body in sight began to bubble with black liquid and turn putrid. Harry swallowed back bile as he watched them dissolve, liquefy into floating purple and green globs. He had to turn his back to keep from losing his breakfast, at the smell and the sight and the knowledge that Voldemort had done this specifically so that no bodies could be brought back to the parents.

Harry remained hovering for some moments, both to keep guard and to count. Fifty-one, plus the dozen at the lake...

Sixty-three. Sixty-three people I’ve killed.

He flew back towards Hogwarts, through the last hole in the wards, which closed the moment he was inside. He landed near the entrance hall, and, as if in a dream, felt someone hugging him. He didn’t turn, didn’t look up to find out who it was, probably Draco or Snape, or maybe Connor. It didn’t matter. Remembering the choice and the number was what mattered.

I made the choice. I don’t know if it was the right one. And there will certainly be people in Hogwarts who want to turn me over to Voldemort, in hopes that he’ll keep his promise and let them live. He

won't, of course, but that's what they could think will happen. And they'll see his not attacking Hogwarts as a powerful man's choice, rather than, as it is really is, fear and the belief that he can't kill me until Midsummer anyway.

Thirteen days of siege.

This will be hard.

And I do not know if I made the right choice.

Chapter Eighty-Eight: Path of Broken Glass

Minerva stood on the Astronomy Tower and watched with black hatred as Voldemort invested Hogwarts' grounds.

He had returned, scarcely five minutes after he had gone into the Forbidden Forest, with more Death Eaters. In fact, there were several hundred, a fact which dazzled and dazed her. The Dark Lord had never managed to summon that many except in the very last days of his power, just before he fell at Godric's Hollow. His recruiters must have been busy, especially among those students of Durmstrang whom Karkaroff would have had a chance to try and corrupt, but Minerva couldn't understand why. Why would they listen to him? What could he promise them? What made them so certain that he would not merely fall again?

And these Death Eaters had obviously practiced what they were going to do when they arrived in the grounds, or at least been told. They set up neat and immediate camps, lines of tents carefully protected with wards that Minerva recognized as those that would resist both weather and fire. The second kind made her want to laugh. Do they think we're going to be launching fireballs at them from the castle?

Well, they might, she supposed. She continued watching, and in a moment saw the reason why Voldemort and his minions had been able to pass through the Forbidden Forest so freely.

The ground shook as the giants arrived, at least twenty of them, all twelve feet tall and grunting as they set their immense weapons—clubs and spears—down on the Quidditch Pitch. The moment they were settled, one of the Death Eaters strode over to them from the middle of the camp. Minerva couldn't make out who it was from this distance, where he was just a moving dark robe, but thought it was probably Karkaroff, the wizard who had contacted the giants in the first place. Now he appeared to be making some kind of speech to them.

Minerva gave a rapid shiver, and hoped that Voldemort would keep his word, as much as that was possible, and not attack Hogwarts

before Midsummer. They badly needed to come up with some kind of plan that would incorporate this many giants. Harry had made a few contingency plans for them, but not even he had suspected that Voldemort would bring more than ten.

Harry...

Minerva swallowed around the pain in her throat. Everyone in Hogwarts had heard Voldemort's final promise, because that was his intention. The adults would know better than to trust him. But the students, even the older students, might not. They might think they could earn passage out of the siege by turning Harry over. Minerva wondered, with resignation nearly as cold as her hatred, how long it would be before one of them would try.

She abruptly swung around, her eyes wide. She had wards up to prevent Apparition anywhere in Hogwarts; she was certain that if that weren't the case, then some of the Death Eaters would already have entered that way. But now the wards were telling her that strangers had entered anyway.

Godric appeared at her side a moment later, gasping as if he'd run. His robes looked rumpled, and his eyes were wide with fear. He was so upset that when his feet passed through one side of the Tower, he didn't seem to care.

"Minerva!" he cried. "There are Death Eaters using Portkeys to appear inside Hogwarts! A supply closet on the fifth floor, an old snogging room near the Prefects' Bathroom, one of the abandoned classrooms on the second floor—"

"I feel them," Minerva snapped, and began to run. "Just three pairs, so far?"

"Yes!" Godric kept pace with her. "But there may be more any moment. After all, many of them are going to know what Hogwarts looks like inside, since they were students here." The bitter undercurrent in his voice was strong.

Minerva nodded, and reached out a hand to him. Godric clasped it, though she felt only the faintest brush of warm flesh; he was most solid near the anchor-stone, and they were far from it.

Concentrating, they brought another ward whipping up, one they'd prepared but hadn't used because they had known Portkeys might be necessary to employ at some point. This one rendered all Portkeys useless within the school itself. The wards on the grounds were so shredded from Voldemort absorbing their magic that Minerva wouldn't have wanted to try and extend this protection there, if it were even possible. Now, though, the Death Eaters who had ventured into the school were trapped.

"Where are Rowena and Helga?" Minerva demanded, when that was done. They were coming down from the Tower now, and she was cursing her old bones. Well, when needs must, dignity is no answer, she thought, and dropped into her Animagus form. A tabby cat could bound down the stairs and around corners much faster than an old witch could.

"Rowena is going after the ones near the Prefects' Bathroom," said Godric, sounding a bit calmer. "And Helga is facing them on the second floor. They left the fifth floor for us, since we were closest."

Minerva mewed to show she understood, and then hurried forward. One of the moving staircases tried to turn on her, but she jumped from one revolving step to another, toe-walked across a banister, and sprang easily to the floor on the other side. She picked up speed after that, as if she had seen a mouse desperate to get away.

She saw the supply closet that Godric was talking about the moment they reached the fifth floor, because it was standing open, and no students would have been on this floor; Minerva had ordered their Heads of House to take them back to their common rooms the moment they were all inside. Two heavysset, unfamiliar men were walking hastily up the corridor, their hands on their wands. They obviously hadn't noticed her yet.

Minerva fought the urge to arch her back and spit, which would only alert them to her presence. She changed back instead, and drew her

wand. A nonverbal Body-Bind caught one of them, and the other spun around, his face red, as his companion toppled to the floor.

He called out a curse Minerva knew better than to stand in the way of, and she spun aside as it slammed into the stone where she'd been standing. Godric flew at the man, but he dodged, his attention focused on Minerva. She leveled her wand, meanwhile, and murmured, "Transformo columbae!"

In a moment, the dangerous Death Eater was a helplessly fluttering dove, his wand clattering to the floor. Minerva conjured a cage and stuck him in that. The dove pecked at the bars and glared at her, as much as a bird could. Minerva meanwhile Stunned the other man, then released him from the Body-Bind and Transfigured him into a goldfish, conjuring a bowl of water immediately. She liked Transfiguring her enemies. It didn't kill them, but it kept them from causing trouble.

Carrying cage and bowl, she looked up at Godric. "Do Rowena and Helga need any help?"

"No," he said, drifting down to let his feet rest on the floor again. "Rowena knows so many spells I don't—she handled hers just fine. And you haven't ever seen what Helga's like when a student's threatened, Minerva." He shivered a bit. "She had the stones of the castle eat them."

Minerva nodded fiercely, satisfied. "And there are no other Death Eaters in Hogwarts?"

"No," said Godric firmly. "We felt only three pulls on the wards." He closed his eyes and sighed. "But this means that the students won't be able to use Portkeys to escape, doesn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," said Minerva. The pounding excitement of the battle had faded, allowing her to remember their predicament. "The moment I lower the wards, more Death Eaters would come in."

"Most likely," Godric agreed. "Then the Floo Networks are our best bet, I would think—"

“Not so.”

Minerva turned around. Peter was standing behind her, his face pale. Minerva frowned at him. “You aren’t at the Tower?” she asked.

“I asked Acies to watch the Gryffindors so I could come and speak with you,” said Peter. “And I looked in your office first. The Floo connection’s gone, Minerva. Destroyed. A spell I’ve never seen before, cast on it. The only thing I could tell was that it was a time-delayed one.”

“How could you be sure the Floo connection was destroyed?” Minerva asked, not wanting to believe it. She had thought they would manage to evacuate the students somehow, not listening to Voldemort’s insane dictum, and that, come Midsummer, only those who had chosen to face battle would remain.

“Because,” said Peter softly, “the fireplace collapsed. I lifted some of the stones back to their original places and cast the Floo powder in it, but there’s not a spark. No fire will burn in it. I tried every incantation I knew. And then I sent rats to the other Floo connections—the hospital wing, and Severus’s rooms, and all the others in the school. They all came back with the same message. Destroyed.”

“I—there has to be some mistake.” Minerva pressed the goldfish bowl to her face, feeling faint. “I refuse to think that a saboteur could have entered Severus’s rooms. A rat might be able to get in, Peter, but he has wards against everything else. Even Animagi.”

“If someone managed to cast a spell on your Floo connection, Minerva, that wouldn’t matter,” Godric said, his face distressed again. “They’re all linked to the one in the Headmistress’s office, so that she can prevent just anyone from coming into Hogwarts. Remove that keystone, and the others are going to break.”

Minerva restrained the impulse to utter some truly vile curses. “We have a traitor inside Hogwarts, then,” she said flatly.

Peter nodded. Godric murmured, “It seems so.”

Minerva closed her eyes and tried to control the reeling sickness in her belly. She had welcomed all of Harry's allies in her office on Friday afternoon, making sure they understood what was expected of them as long as they stayed in Hogwarts. The professors had been there as well. Anyone would have had a chance to cast a spell on her fireplace, particularly one that she didn't recognize, and one that was time-delayed to have no immediate effect. It could have been any of them.

She took a deep breath, and shook her head, and forced her eyes to open. "Then Voldemort has managed to shut most of the ways out of Hogwarts," she murmured. "I can't lower the wards against Apparition and Portkeys in case his Death Eaters enter. The Floo connections are damaged. Anyone flying over the grounds on a broom will be risking his or her life, and certainly the lives of any students."

"There are still some ways out," said Peter softly. "I was a Marauder, Minerva. I'll send the rats through the secret passages, to spy them out and see which ones are safe. That was actually what I was coming to your office to see you about."

Minerva felt her heart begin to beat again. "Thank you, Peter," she said, and smiled at him. "I appreciate it."

Indigena was beginning to wonder if she would spend most of her days spitting dirt.

She crouched in a large tunnel that led from Hogwarts into Hogsmeade—the inhabitants of the village had already fled, of course, leaving their homes and shops open to Death Eater foraging—and wound it with her vines. Other plants snaked through the soil in all directions, finding and digging into the passages that led across the grounds. The Dark Lord didn't think that many of them would see use, since most of them came up somewhere in the middle of the Death Eater encampment, but he wanted to guard the ones his hostages might use to escape.

It's easier if I think of them as hostages and not victims, Indigena thought, head cocked to the side as she wreathed the tunnel with

another hanging drape of green tendrils and white flowers. The white flowers would look harmless enough, even pretty, to anyone who met them. But they contained an incense that would incapacitate any human, dropping them dreaming to the floor of the passage, where the tendrils could grab them and hand them to Indigena.

Indigena had just finished the third curtain of white flowers when she paused. The tendrils that coiled around the tunnel further towards Hogwarts—not much beyond her, really, since the Dark Lord’s strict instructions were to leave Hogwarts alone until Midsummer—were telling her about intruders. But not human intruders, or the flowers would already have breathed. Indigena listened to the reports of vibrations for a moment, then smiled.

“I think I hear the pitter-patter of little feet,” she remarked to the loops that draped over her shoulders. “Shall we do something about that?”

The vines agreed, and lashed out from her shoulders, traveling fast down the tunnel. Indigena waited, and soon they hauled several squeaking, thrashing rats within reach of her wand.

Indigena examined them minutely, and then cast several spells to be sure. They were all ordinary rats, not an Animagus among them. The traitor in the castle who went by the name of Peter Pettigrew and was a rat Animagus had probably summoned them, though.

She had the tendrils fling them back down the tunnel, and commanded the other plants in the secret passages where the rats had tried to sense a way out for the students to do the same. It would do no harm, and probably much good, to send Pettigrew’s little spies back to him and report that there was no way out where Yaxley’s vines coiled.

Indigena encouraged her plants to grow even more thickly after that. Naughty traitors, to imagine that there is a way out for them while I am on my Lord’s side.

Nineteen. And sixty-three.

"I don't know what the Ministry can do to help us, if anything," said Harry, keeping his voice low. He was pacing in the corridor just outside the hospital wing, where he'd been to visit those who had escaped from the battle with wounds. He'd invoked the communication spell to Priscilla Burke as soon as he left, as she was the only person in the Ministry he'd counted as enough of an ally to have taught the spell to. "We're trapped here with no way out. Someone's destroyed the Floo connections. The Headmistress has to keep up wards against Apparitions and Portkeys, in case the Death Eaters leap inside the moment they're lowered. Brooms are too dangerous, for obvious reasons, and Indigena Yaxley's plants are blocking the tunnels that lead out through the grounds."

He heard Priscilla make a noise of frustration that seemed to emanate from just above his wrist, but she didn't say anything for a long moment. That gave Harry leisure to lean against the wall and make the count in his head again.

Nineteen. And sixty-three. That makes eighty-two. Harry cradled the number in his mind like the key Arithmancy equation that would have allowed him to pass his OWL. Nineteen alive, but drained of magic. Sixty-three dead. Eighty-two people I've hurt. And how many hundreds have I failed?

"You have to understand, Harry," said Priscilla then, "we already have parents going mad and insisting the Ministry do something. They're not going to take it kindly when we tell them there's no way into or out of Hogwarts."

Harry heard a bark of laughter escape before he could stop himself. He bit his lips after that, though, because if he started laughing, he knew he wouldn't stop. He began pacing again, and listened to the way his steps on the floor seemed to bespeak numbers. Sixty-three. Nineteen. Sixty-three. Nineteen. "And why do you think Voldemort is doing this?" he asked her bluntly. "He wants to panic people. I'm sure he'd just love it if parents came onto Hogwarts grounds searching for a way to rescue their children. More hostages, and he could torture them in front of the walls and know that at least one child would see

his mother or father dying in front of him. Lovely plan, to let them come. It's all working out for him."

"Harry," said Priscilla, voice growing harder. Harry couldn't tell which emotion drove her more, desperation or pain. "We can't stop them from going, if they choose to. The Ministry doesn't have enough Aurors to encircle Hogwarts and keep people from getting into the midst of the Death Eaters. Not to mention that he would attack if he saw us show up, anyway," she added.

"If you value their lives, you'll issue a warning about how stupid they'd be if they try to come here," said Harry, and rubbed his eyes with his hand. He felt exhausted, and it wasn't much after noon. Of course, the onrush of bad news and what he'd done that morning and the numbers repeating in his head would be enough to tire anyone out, but he needed to remain awake. "Make it blunt, no language spared. People have to know they're risking their lives if they come here, and their children's sanity. I don't care how much they miss their children, against that. They should stay away."

"They won't like it," Priscilla repeated.

"That, frankly, is not my problem," said Harry, and matched the snap in his voice to hers. "You may have missed this, but it's a little hard for me to influence parents when I'm in Hogwarts and trying to make sure that Voldemort doesn't take any of the hundreds of potential hostages around me."

Another little silence, and Harry went back to pacing. Sixty-three. Nineteen. Sixty-three. Nineteen.

"I'm sorry," Priscilla said quietly. "The Ministry's been besieged with owls and visitors since people started Apparating into London from Hogsmeade and reporting that there were Death Eaters at Hogwarts, and it's had me—upset. How's Thomas?"

Harry shrugged, then remembered she couldn't see him. "Well, from what I know," he said.

“That’s good, then,” Priscilla said, her voice a bit lighter. “We’ll do what we can, Harry, to keep people from panicking and people from coming to Hogwarts. I can’t promise we’ll be completely successful.”

“Do what you can,” Harry said, and then cut off the communication spell and leaned against the wall for a moment. Sixty-three. Nineteen. Sixty-three. Nineteen. And eighty-two altogether.

Before he could close his eyes and start thinking about what was going to happen next, Draco came through the doors of the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey had wanted him in the hospital wing to help comfort the wounded Slytherin students, as he was one of the few who hadn’t been out on the battlefield himself. Snape was in his offices brewing the healing potions that Pomfrey was already running out of. That, Harry thought, was the only reason he’d been left alone so long after Snape’s initial catch and embrace of him.

From the look on Draco’s face, though, his solitude was about to end. Harry pushed himself up and tried to brace for the question.

“What happened when you were hovering over the lake?” Draco asked quietly.

Harry winced. Trust Draco to go straight to the heart of the most painful matter. But hiding this wasn’t something he could do. He had to let Snape, Draco, and eventually everyone else dear to him—and, of course, the children’s parents, when he was able to contact them—know exactly what he’d done, what he’d turned into out there.

“Voldemort had a dozen first-years and second-years in a Life-Web,” he said. “He offered to let them go if I would come down to him.”

“But you didn’t,” said Draco, and stared at him.

Harry shook his head. “Only the caster can break a Life-Web. He might have promised to let them go, but then I’d have to depend on him to keep his word. He could will them to die, hurt, go mad, anything, as long as he held that damn web. And he could have broken any spell I put on them, once he knew what it was, spells to heal them or levitate them away or do anything else. And while I hung

there trying to decide what to do, people were dying around me.” He closed his eyes for a moment.

“What did you do?” Draco’s voice was as soft as a prayer.

“I used a spell that he didn’t think I would ever use, and so didn’t counter in time,” Harry answered, opening his eyes. “I killed them by giving them heart attacks.”

Draco was staring at him, and Draco’s stare filled all the world. Harry stared back. He deserved anything that might appear there, Merlin knew. Disgust, hatred, anger, shock, rejection... The list of possible emotions was so long that he hadn’t finished it before Draco moved.

Draco’s arms curled around Harry and tugged him hard against him. Harry leaned his head on Draco’s shoulder, and wondered what emotion this was. He knew what he wanted it to be, what emotion the warm embrace seemed to proclaim it, but he also knew that he’d changed, and no one would ever look at him the same way again. That meant Draco couldn’t have been hugging him in simple love.

“Merlin,” Draco said into his neck. “Oh, Merlin. Harry.” The next moment, Harry felt hot tears land on the side of his collar.

Harry patted his back then, his own body relaxing. He could deal with this. Grief and horror were feelings he knew well, knew how to comfort and soothe. And if they were directed at him, well, he knew how to deal with that, too. He’d seen them in his parents’ eyes during the last day of their trial.

“I’m so sorry,” Draco whispered. “I’m so sorry this happened to you. Harry—that can’t—I don’t know what else you could have done, but I can’t—that can’t have been easy,” he finished, his words choking around the sobs and limping to a halt.

Harry leaned back against the wall with his arms still around Draco, his hand still stroking soothing, comforting circles. He had the feeling he’d be doing this a lot in the next few days. Best to get used to this now.

“Harry, Harry, Harry,” were Draco’s next words, like a mantra. “Why aren’t you crying, too?”

“Because if I begin,” said Harry, staring over Draco’s head at the far wall, “if I start now, I’m not going to stop.”

Draco gave a convulsive shudder, and then abruptly stiffened in Harry’s arms. Harry could feel himself frown. What is it? Has he just now realized the full implications of what I’ve done?

“You think that, don’t you?” Draco asked, voice low and tense as an accusation.

“Think what?”

“You think it’s your fault. You think you should have made another decision, even though there was no other decision you could make.” Draco pulled himself away and grabbed Harry’s shoulders, shaking him. “Damn it, Harry, don’t do this! That’s how he’ll get inside your head. He doesn’t need to send dreams, not when he can make your own guilt eat you alive!”

“If I don’t feel this guilt,” Harry said quietly, not resisting the shaking, “then I’d already be gone, another Dumbledore or another Voldemort. This way, I know I’m still human.”

Draco said several things a properly-bred Malfoy, in Harry’s opinion, shouldn’t know. “And what solution would have been better?” he demanded then. “You, giving yourself up? You said it, Harry. You could have done that, and he still wouldn’t have released the Life-Web. All you would have achieved was your own martyrdom and a kind of squalling pride that at least you did the right thing. Fine if you want to die a Gryffindor, but damn you, you have to stay alive.”

“Oh, I know that,” said Harry, mildly puzzled that Draco would think he didn’t know that. “Boy-Who-Lived and all that, right?”

“Stop it, stop it, stop it,” Draco said, leaning in towards him now, voice low and intense. “Damn you, Harry, please. Don’t do this. You’re

blaming yourself, and that's going to tear you apart, and then how are we going to survive this siege?"

"We're going to survive it because I'll make myself into a symbol," said Harry, and stepped back, tearing away from Draco's grip. "A symbol of hope or a symbol of hatred, whatever they need. You know there will be people who want to turn me over to Voldemort, in hopes that he'll keep his promise. I can't even blame them. I hoped, for one insane moment, that he would have kept his promise if I'd gone down to him."

Draco tried to grab him again. Harry dodged. He'd felt the trembling and cracking of the edges of his control as he stood there. He couldn't stay. Draco would hold him again and try to make him—Harry didn't even know what it would be, but it would involve admission of guilt and perhaps crying, and it would shatter him. He couldn't shatter, not now.

Draco called after him. Harry walked down the corridor and didn't look back. He had to get to McGonagall and offer her his strength to help bolster the wards on the castle itself.

Owen had ears. And he didn't like what he heard.

He and Michael had shadowed Harry for most of the morning and early afternoon, but as Harry spent a large part of the early evening cooped up with the Headmistress, they'd gone exploring. They wanted to know what the school thought of Harry, how many were hopeful and how many hostile and how many too terrified to think.

And so they went to the Great Hall, concealed with Dark Arts spells that Professor Fleur-de-lis had taught them at Durmstrang, and watched as the children brought there for dinner conversed and argued with each other. Many conversations were low-voiced, and choked with tears. Unnoticed, though, Owen and Michael could get close to the various House tables and listen in.

"I can't believe she's gone," was a common theme, with a variation of "He's gone," and Owen learned to ignore them. They were grieving, and grieving was a natural process after what had happened on the

battlefield this morning. He himself had endured enough of it at Durmstrang, Merlin knew, after yet another day in which he saw yet another fellow student brutally tortured.

The other conversations were the ones that interested him more. The first he heard was between two older Gryffindor students, talking to each other in voices that the crack of cutlery and buzzed whispers of others would normally have concealed.

“Do you think he’s right?” one of them, a pale and rather pretty brown-haired girl, asked the other, a tall boy with dark eyes. “Do you think that if we really gave him Harry, then he’d leave us alone?”

“I don’t know,” said the boy, but not firmly enough to make Owen think he was Harry’s supporter. “We can’t trust him, I suppose. I mean—I know we can’t. But maybe...” His voice trailed off, and he said no more.

“Maybe,” the brown-haired girl whispered, and Owen nearly snorted at what he heard in her voice. Desperate hope, the kind of hope that got in under one’s heart and tore it. There had been some students at Durmstrang who thought that doing just what Bellatrix wanted, even torturing others when she ordered them to, would spare them. It hadn’t worked. And yet people had kept doing it and kept doing it. Stripped down to a question of their own survival or someone else’s, a surprising number of people would choose their own survival.

Owen supposed he couldn’t blame them. They were children, true children, even though the girl looked older than he was. They hadn’t learned, as he had, that you put aside those niggling little hopes and lived through a situation like this by pushing forward and enduring.

He passed the Ravenclaw table, and noticed the largest knot of students he’d seen yet, focused around one furiously whispering girl. Owen moved carefully nearer. One girl looked around suspiciously at the breeze on the back of her neck, but didn’t, of course, see him, so she returned to dancing attendance on the other.

Owen listened, too, and what he heard raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

“—for a reason,” the single, intense girl was saying, gesturing with one hand. “It all happened for a reason. The compulsion spell from Dumbledore, the Dark Arts we learned from Rovenan, everything. It was to prepare us for this. For a situation when we might have to do the right thing because no one else would.” She sat back and stared challengingly at the others.

“Yes, Margaret,” said another, her face troubled, “but the compulsion spell was to make us hate Harry just because Dumbledore hated him. What if this is the same kind of thing? You-Know-Who wants to make us turn on Harry because he hates Harry?”

Margaret shook her head. “Not the same thing,” she said, “not at all. Dumbledore was doing it because he’d been arrested for child abuse, and he hated that. He wanted to resume his power. But You-Know-Who just wants to kill Harry. The point isn’t getting us to hate him. The point is getting him. And you heard what he said. The moment he gets him, he’ll leave us alone. Or he’ll attack without mercy on Midsummer morning.”

Most of the students huddled around her flinched at that. A boy spoke this time. “Can we really trust him to keep his promises, though?”

“I’ve read some histories of the First War,” said Margaret, insistent. “You-Know-Who would sometimes send warnings to those villages he wanted to attack, promising the Death Eaters would strike at such and such a time. And they always did. He keeps his promises. I think he’ll keep this one.”

Owen concealed another snort. He had read those histories, too. What the survivors tended to forget was that Voldemort had only made such “promises” when he was fully come to power, and could use terror of his name just as effectively as actual raids. Before the last year of the War, he had never warned, simply attacked. There hadn’t been a single survivor of the Battle of Valerian.

“It’s something to think about,” said Margaret, with a firm nod.

And you’re someone to watch, Owen thought, and shifted away.

The Hufflepuff table actually exploded in a row as he watched, one that their Head had to come and break up. As she forcibly separated the two boys in the middle, one of them yelled, "I don't care what you say, Zacharias! He's going to kill us all if he doesn't get him!"

"You're being an idiot, Ernie," the other boy, who looked as cool and calm and unruffled as it was possible to be, murmured. "Of course he won't let us go. Why would he? A castle full of hostages to terrify, to torture, and to use on our parents to make sure they don't fight him? Oh, yes, let us go, wonderful idea. He isn't worthy of the name of evil, murdering bastard if he does."

"Some of us might be able to leave," Ernie insisted. It was patently obvious to Owen that he hoped he'd be among them. "You never know—"

"That is enough, both of you," said their Head sharply. "You are coming with me to my office right now."

Owen drifted over to the Slytherin table while that was settled. He didn't hear much there, though. Apart from anything else, some of them were using spells that muffled their conversations, and he had to be careful lest one of them managed to dispel the concealment charm he was using.

He met his brother back in the middle of the Hall, and looked an inquiry at him. Michael shook his head, eyes even darker than usual.

"It's—going to be hard for Harry," he said.

Owen smiled grimly at his twin. "Good thing that he's got us to protect him, then, and that we have a few less scruples than he does," he said, and Michael nodded back, his hand closing on his wand.

Harry stood on top of the North Tower, barely a few inches from the shimmer of Hogwarts's strengthened wards, and looked down at the campfires of Voldemort's army.

And it was an army, a true one. Harry knew that the Death Eaters Indigena had rescued from Tullianum had swelled his ranks, but only by a small amount. The majority of these men and women were new recruits, culled from other countries; Harry thought that he would have had some advance notice if so many Dark wizards had disappeared from Britain.

His hand tightened on the stone for a moment as he watched an owl, dodging towards the school, spiral to the ground in the wake of an Avada Kedavra curse. He wondered grimly whose owl it had been. A parent, trying to send a letter or a Portkey to a child? One of the Daily Prophet's owls attempting valiantly to bring the paper in? One of the regular pieces of correspondence that McGonagall dealt with in her position as Headmistress? They would never know. The Death Eaters had been killing all the owls that either tried to leave the school or reach it since they arrived that morning. Well, of course they would, Harry thought. The owls might bring a means of escape, and Voldemort wouldn't want that.

He supposed he should be in bed. But there was no one to make him go. Harry had Vanished away from Owen and Michael, and Draco when he had come looking for him, and Snape was still in his offices, this time brewing the Veritaserum that McGonagall needed to interrogate the captured Death Eaters.

There was a traitor inside the school. And Harry had brought him there.

He leaned his head on the stone and breathed in the cool air. This high, he couldn't smell the scent of the campfires, and the stars themselves seemed to make the night frosty and distant. He could pretend, for a moment, that he was reading about this situation in a history book or hearing about it as a story long after it was over, and his head could clear.

And then the numbers came back.

Sixty-three. Nineteen. One.

The “one” was that of a girl who'd slipped into a coma when Madam Pomfrey tried to cure the pain curse she'd suffered. The matron was unsure if she'd done it because of the pain curse, or because she was allergic to the potion used. Either way, she was hovering beside her bed now, trying frantically to bring her back to life and to light.

Sixty-three and nineteen and one made eighty-three. Harry was sure the number would climb before it was over.

He turned when he heard a light footstep behind him on the stone. It took him a moment longer to recognize who stood there, because her black robes blended so well with the night around her. Then he saw one of her sleeves flutter for no good reason, and knew it was Pansy.

Pansy, who had missed breakfast, because she must have known that those students would die on the battlefield this morning, and she was sworn by her oaths as a necromancer not to reveal that.

Harry drew in a deep breath, and then let it out again. He wasn't sure what he could say. Even if he gave her words of comfort, she couldn't respond to them, except in the sign language that he didn't know. And he couldn't blame her for not warning him. She was forbidden to.

She edged up beside him, though, and Harry could read the silent appeal in her body language well enough. He reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. The tension flowed out of Pansy, and she bowed her head. The intangible wind playing with the edge of her sleeve seemed to slow. Harry was almost sure he had soothed her.

He smiled at her, and then turned to make his way down the stairs. He'd patrol the school, and see if he encountered anyone roaming out of bed. The professors were so busy comforting all the students that they were bound to miss one or two.

And if that person needed to talk to him, then Harry could listen. If that person needed to punch him, he could allow that, too. If that person needed to scream and shriek in hatred because of what he had done, then Harry could take that, because he was ultimately strong enough to resist it, and he was ultimately in the wrong.

Sixty-three, sang his trainers as they whispered against the steps on the way down. Nineteen. One. Sixty-three. Nineteen. One.

Snape was unsurprised to find that the Death Eaters had already been Transfigured back from a dove and a goldfish when he carried the Veritaserum into McGonagall's office the next morning. They were seated in chairs, not only tied with ropes but stuck in Body-Binds that left their jaws alone hanging loose. The Headmistress looked up from contemplating their faces, and nodded to him.

Snape felt a grim surge of satisfaction as he uncapped the first vial. Dumbledore would have objected to this. In the end, of course, he would have allowed it anyway, after admitting that his methods of trying to persuade the Death Eaters wouldn't work, but he would have dithered long enough to cause harm and get him, morally, off the hook. McGonagall charged ahead and did what she had to do to protect her students, and moral consequences could be faced later.

Somewhat like Harry, in fact.

Draco had come to him last night, when he couldn't find Harry, and told him the tale of the dozen dead children. Snape understood as no one else could have. He'd committed murders even after he became a spy, because that was the only way he could have maintained his cover as one of the most vicious and violent of the Death Eaters. Sometimes he'd tried to find a way out, but with Voldemort's eyes always on him, there was usually no other decision to be made. One did what one had to do, secure in both the boiling bile of one's own conscience and hatred and misunderstanding from those who would never have to make such choices.

Snape wished that Harry had come to him. But Harry had not, and though a few of the other professors had reported seeing him in the halls, they had not approached him. Too busy with their own students, Pomona and Filius had told him when he asked.

Or too afraid, Snape thought, as he tipped the Veritaserum down the first man's throat. They think him marked for death already. No one walks too close to a man like that.

The prisoners became slack-jawed and loose-tongued enough when they had swallowed the potion, and willing to answer McGonagall's questions. For the most part, their answers were as expected. They knew nothing of why Voldemort had wanted to attack Hogwarts early, or who might have destroyed the Floo connections, and he had sent them with Portkeys to force McGonagall to bring down wards that would prevent their use. There were others waiting with Portkeys, and with the word Apparate poised on their lips, for the moment when she might lower those wards to try and send the students home.

Then McGonagall asked, "Does Voldemort mean to keep his promise to attack on Midsummer Day, and Midsummer Day alone?"

"Yes," said the one on the left, a man with dreaming, stupid eyes that Snape was not surprised had joined the Death Eaters. Idiots, the lot of them who would join with him now, he thought, curling his lip. "He will destroy everything on Midsummer. Unless Harry Potter is handed over to him first."

The second said the same thing, in almost the same words, when the Headmistress asked him. McGonagall glanced at Snape, to ask if he had any questions. Snape leaned forward. Both men wore identical robes, and had worn identical masks. Nothing to indicate which one of them was higher-ranking, and if they were both newcomers, as demonstrated by the state of their knowledge so far, then neither would know that much about their Lord's plans anyway.

But he did ask, "How will Voldemort use the giants in battle?"

"I don't know," said one, and then the other.

Snape frowned. He'd noticed that the one on the left had a very slight trace of a French accent, so he focused on him. "How has Voldemort been recruiting in France?"

"Through a contact in Beauxbatons," the Death Eater said dreamily. "I don't know who it is. He passes messages on to former students who are sympathetic to the pureblood cause, and they pass messages on to others."

Snape looked at McGonagall, but she was already standing, moving to her desk and scribbling something down. "When we can send owls again," she said, without looking up, "then I will inform Madame Maxime of the problem on her staff."

Snape felt a surge of gratitude that she had said when and not if. Then he told himself not to be ridiculous. The Headmistress might be the best leader for the school in this time of crisis, but that did not mean he had to feel gratitude towards her. Someone had to keep a clear head in what was rapidly turning into an exploding nest of loathing and fear.

As if the revelation had given her fresh strength, McGonagall returned to the interrogation. She still didn't elicit much that had to do with the present battle, but she was learning essential things about the methods Voldemort had used to find his Death Eaters in France, Spain, Belgium, and Germany. When this siege ended, Snape thought—when, not if—they would be armed with information that might enable other nations to join in and prevent more Dark wizards from flowing into Britain.

And when this is done, I am going to find Harry.

Harry moved carefully along a dungeon corridor. He'd nearly run into Connor in the entrance hall, as his brother passed him on his way to the hospital wing to visit Ginny, who'd sustained a nasty cut to the shoulder protecting the Ravenclaw students yesterday. Harry was glad that he'd concealed himself at the last moment, so Connor couldn't see what he looked like. As it turned out, one of the Hufflepuff boys who'd seen two of his friends riding in the same carriage with him did had wanted to punch him, and while Harry had taken the blow on his cheek without much damage, Connor was sure to fuss over it and pretend it was worse than it was.

He'd almost reached the common room door. He intended to be even more careful in opening it. He'd seen the way some of his Housemates watched him last night. It was one thing to unite against Ravenclaw Death Eaters attacking him in the school. He wondered, now that open war had come at last, how many would be thinking of saving their own skins, and how many had relatives outside the

school in masks. He would stay only long enough to retrieve some of the ingredients for a common healing potion from his trunk, and then go to brew it. He could give what was left over to Madam Pomfrey.

A hand closed on his shoulder, and Harry nearly panicked before a too-familiar voice said, "There you are."

Harry turned around in resignation. Snape stood behind him, and his eyes narrowed when he caught sight of Harry's swelling cheek. Harry looked away for a moment.

"You know," said Snape, voice soft with fury, "that making yourself into a martyr will not serve to keep the siege at bay. Why are you doing it?"

Well, at least he's not playing sympathetic. That's a relief. "Because Edgar White needed to work out some of his frustrations, sir," said Harry, his voice neutral. "And by hitting me, he avoided hitting someone else. And it's true that I didn't anticipate that Voldemort would attack early, when I really should have."

Snape gave a jerked-off noise that might have been a laugh in another universe. "We should have anticipated that, Harry," he said. "The professors, and the rest of the school. We thought the students safe enough behind the wards as they went down to the Station; it was only a short carriage ride. We were the ones who did not anticipate that the Dark Lord would swallow those wards. Do not rub the stain of blood so deep into your skin that it will never come out." He tugged hard on Harry's shoulder, turning him around. "And come with me, so that I can give you a healing potion for your cheek."

Harry followed obediently, but did feel compelled to say, "You must know what I've done, sir. Draco would have told you."

"I've heard." Snape did not look at him as he strode rapidly along the corridors. That relieved Harry, but at the same time, he couldn't reconcile it with the fact that Snape was telling him not to make himself a martyr. The lack of sympathy made sense. But why was there still some sympathy left?

“Then you must know what I’ve become,” Harry said.

“Become?” Snape stared at him now.

“The same as Dumbledore,” said Harry, staring into his eyes, willing him to understand. He didn’t open his Occlumency pools, because he didn’t want to let Snape into the echoing cavern of grief and pain and numbers that was his head, but he let as much emotion as he could shine on the surface. “Someone who sacrifices a small number of people for what he calls the greater good. Someone who makes horrible decisions because he let himself be backed into a corner, and then justifies it by saying that he couldn’t have done anything else. I’ve tried to prevent the rot setting in too deep by not justifying my decision, sir, but there’s no getting around the fact that I did this. The person I was two days ago would not have.” He winced as he neared the end of that speech. The swelling at the edge of his jaw was starting to interfere with his talking.

Snape gazed at him in silence. Then he said, “Harry, I committed numerous crimes when I knew what the Light was, when my conscience had been restored to me, because it was the only way I could continue to serve the side I thought was right. I—grieve for it. And I did not let it change my whole perception of myself, because I knew how and why I did it. In time, I came to understand that there are different kinds of courage in the world. This is the courage that a Gryffindor will never understand, the courage to make a decision that the world will hate you for and not hate yourself for it.”

“But that’s exactly what Dumbledore did, sir, and why my mother said I should believe in him,” said Harry. He felt a strand of wondering agitation twine through his brain. Why was Snape doing this? He had changed, he knew he had changed, and Snape, if he had gone through a similar situation, should only know it along with him. “He made the hard decisions that everyone would hate him for—“

“And he tricked himself into believing they were the right ones.” Snape sneered. “Always, he justified himself to himself. In time, he minimized the costs, and then he could always choose the road of sacrifice, because the costs meant nothing to him. You have already resisted that by not justifying your decision. You know what those

lives cost. You know you will never make a decision like that as a routine matter of course. You are not Dumbledore, Harry."

"Perhaps not yet," said Harry. "But does it really matter that my action was small and his were larger?"

"Yes," said Snape, voice like a hammer. "Yes, it does. If you will not understand me on that scale, Harry, then understand me on this one. Can you see yourself dwindling into what Dumbledore became at the last?"

"Not right now," said Harry. "But I could become that. I could progress along the road of sacrifice until—"

"Then you are not there yet," said Snape. "And you are aware of it. Unless you insist on believing in destiny like a Hufflepuff and thinking that every action we take advances us in a certain direction regardless of whether we want to go there, then you will resist this temptation. It is only a temptation like the others, Harry, a trap set to destroy you. Think yourself evil, or doomed to become evil, and you are doing to yourself what your mother and Dumbledore wanted to do."

"But what I did was evil!" Harry yelled. "Merlin, why can't you understand that? Every mistake of arrogance, recklessness, stupidity I made yesterday, and before—"

"Then let us examine a situation in which you tortured Voldemort until he released the Life-Web," said Snape, voice emotionless now, the way it was when he lectured on a potion he did not particularly enjoy. "You willingly cause your greatest enemy unimaginable pain until he does your will. A use of compulsion, and a use of agony. And meanwhile, behind you, other children are dying while you wait for Voldemort to crack. And what then?"

Harry snarled at him.

"You see what I am driving at," said Snape. "On some level, you even believe it. There were no right choices, Harry. Those who will cry and scream and blame you for this are those who were not in that

situation, and had they been, they could well have done something worse. Let them cry and scream and blame you, if that is what you want, but do not encourage things like this.” He gestured at Harry’s swollen cheek. “That only increases their conviction that they are right and you are wrong, and it will do you more damage than anything else. It weakens you physically, when we need you strong.” He sniffed, and then sneered. “And you have not eaten, slept, or bathed since yesterday morning, have you?”

“No,” said Harry, knowing he sounded, and looked, very small.

“That is more stupid than anything you did on the battlefield,” said Snape, and turned away with a snap of his robes. “Come with me. When you have had the healing potion, you will bathe, eat, and rest. And I do not care if a hundred Hufflepuffs are seeking to punch you for what you did or failed to do yesterday.”

Harry trailed after him, mind a kaleidoscope of shattered pieces. Snape should know corruption if anyone should, since he had served both Dumbledore and Voldemort. He should have recognized the corruption settling in Harry. And yet he had refused to acknowledge it. He had even insisted that Harry’s plan to let other people take their frustrations out on him was the real stupidity here.

Harry hadn’t decided how that made him feel yet.

“I like the idea, but I can’t think of anything that would make them swallow it,” Harry said, leaning on one elbow as he frowned down at Fred and George’s latest creations, a pair of sweets that would cause the people who ate them to go blind until they ate the antidote.

George—well, Harry thought it was George—gave him a fierce smile. Both the twins’ smiles had grown more edged since the siege began, Harry had noticed. He held up a vial of what looked like water, or perhaps Veritaserum, at the most dangerous. “We thought of that,” he said. “So we’re going to—“

“Fly above them,” Fred finished. “And scatter the drops onto their heads like rain. Whoever it touches will go blind.”

Harry frowned. "And you're sure you won't catch any of our own fighters when they're in the middle of the Death Eaters?"

"Ah, but our side will be carrying the antidote," said Fred, and displayed what looked to Harry like an identical vial. "We'll give it to them before they go into battle, and they'll just have to—"

"Swallow it, if this potion touches them," George finished, and shook the vial he held. Harry drew back from it, a bit warily, though the vial was capped. "We'll tell everyone about that before we go to battle."

Harry nodded. "And you have enough for everyone who'll be fighting next Friday?"

George and Fred gave him identical looks of pity. "Hate to disappoint you, mate," said Fred. "But our army—"

"Just isn't that big," George finished. "We'll have enough for multiple doses of the antidote, come to that."

Harry sighed. "All right. Anything else you have ready yet?"

The twins shook their heads, and left with comments about designing more. Harry leaned back against the wall of the Room of Requirement and watched them go.

It was the third night of the siege, and Harry was letting himself be as cautiously hopeful as he ever got. He was feeling better now that he'd rested and eaten, and both yesterday and today he'd joined Moody in here for intense sessions with the dueling club members. That now included every student fifth year and up—or those students who had been fifth year and up—in the school, though not everyone would be going out onto the battlefield. Some of them would stay in Hogwarts and defend the younger students when Midsummer came.

The days had also included strategizing with the people Harry was absolutely certain he could trust, the twins among them. He had to face the fact that the traitor who had disabled the Floo Network was most likely someone among his allies, and that meant he couldn't talk

to them unless they would consent to take Veritaserum and answer a few questions first. Harry hadn't asked them to do that yet.

He pushed himself wearily to his feet. It had been hours since he'd eaten, and once he did, then Draco had demanded he come back to the Slytherin common room and sleep in his own bed. Otherwise, he'd said, Harry would just show the rest of Slytherin House he was afraid, and some of them would begin to think he was weak, and Harry would have people who might try to open Hogwarts to Voldemort just because the Dark Lord seemed stronger.

Harry made his way quietly to the kitchens. He would ask the house elves for a few pieces of bread and cheese to prepare his own sandwich. They would mostly be asleep at this hour of the night, but a few were always awake, cooking the breakfast in shifts and preparing food that would have to last longer periods of time.

He reached the entrance he knew from the Marauders' Map, the pear he would have to tickle, but slowed down when he heard muffled voices coming from behind the painting. Most of them were house elves, but they sounded shrill with distress, and there were the deeper tones of at least one wizard there. Harry hesitated, and then waited, leaning his ear against the painting and murmuring an eavesdropping spell. If the wizard had legitimate business here and caught him, Harry could always plead the security of the castle.

The wizard's voice came into focus first. "...just let me cast the magic that I need to cast, you chattering imbeciles!" His words were so high with nervousness that Harry didn't recognize him.

"But Headmistress McGonagall says good elves is not letting nobody cast magic in the kitchens!" wailed one of the elves, and Harry heard the soft fleshy sounds that came from them tugging their ears or wringing their hands. "Nobody but good elves is supposed to be here! No sneaking food, no nasty tricks, no no no!"

"It will only take a minute," said the wizard, his voice softening now. "I promise. Just let me cast it, and I'll be out of here in a moment."

“No,” the elves whined in chorus, but Harry suspected they would lose the argument. A wizard could often trick, bully, or persuade servile house elves into doing what he wanted, because they would punish themselves later, and the web kept them too terrified to protest that much unless the threat was blatant.

Harry thought he'd heard enough. If this was innocent, such as casting freshness charms on the food, then the person inside could hardly protest him walking into the situation. But Harry was beginning to suspect that this was the traitor.

It would make sense for him to go after the food, so that it would be easier for Voldemort to starve us out, Harry thought, and tickled the pear. It giggled and transformed into a handle. Harry pulled the door open.

Mortimer Belville swung around, wand in hand. The house elves around him glanced up from sniffing and tugging their ears and banging their heads against tables. Harry caught Belville's eye.

The man panicked. He whipped his wand towards Harry and chanted something in what sounded like Gaelic, a spell Harry had never heard before. A beam of green light not that far from the shade of Avada Kedavra formed and flew towards him. Harry ducked under a table, and saw the light sever the wood neatly.

Yes, Belville is our traitor, he thought, as he scrambled back to one knee and cast a nonverbal Body-Bind. It recoiled from a shield that Belville had brought up around himself. Harry surprised himself with how calm he was. His anger was a mounting boil on the horizon, though. Makes sense, I suppose. None of us recognized the spell that had disabled the Floo connections, either.

Belville got behind the cover of a table, and pointed his wand at the heaps of pancakes and eggs the house elves had set out for breakfast. Harry didn't know what he had in mind—perhaps a rotting curse, or some kind of poison—and he didn't intend to wait and find out.

His anger had arrived, and that was more than enough for him to will Belville to be still. Belville froze. His eyes gaped, and his hand was stone, despite the awkward position his arm was currently in. Harry watched in puzzlement for a moment as his face turned blue, then realized his spell prevented Belville from breathing, too. He shook his head and released the man's lungs from the spell. Belville could breathe, but do nothing else, as Harry floated him out from behind the table, prized his wand out of his motionless fingers, and nodded to the house elves.

"He was trying to hurt Hogwarts," he told them. "I'll take him to the Headmistress, and she'll deal with him. Now, this is very important. Did he cast magic on any food in here?"

"No, Master Harry, sir!" said an elf who still had his hands clamped on his ears. From the sound of his voice, he'd been the one who had objected to Belville casting the charms in the first place. "We prevented him!" There came a chorus of vigorous head-nods from all around the kitchen, and Harry relaxed.

"Thank you," he said, and the elves' eyes welled with tears. Harry went on hastily before they could begin an outburst. "I'll take him into custody from here, but the Headmistress and Professor Snape might have questions for you later."

"Mistress McGonagall and Master Snape shall always be welcome," the house elf in the lead said firmly, and once again the others nodded so hard it looked as if their heads would fall off.

Harry nodded back, and then levered Belville into the air, deliberately floating him upside-down as he began the trek back to McGonagall's office. There was nothing that said he couldn't "enjoy" the experience of blood rushing to his head while Harry maneuvered him along the hallways. At least it was better than dropping him on his skull, which Harry also had the temptation to do.

"Caught the traitor."

Draco hadn't expected Harry to come and sit at the Slytherin table for breakfast that morning, much less make a declaration like that. He

stared, his mouth gaping open in a most un-Malfoyish manner, while Harry began to eat his pancakes, simply ignoring the eyes that watched him from around the Great Hall.

“Well, who was it?” Draco demanded at last, when Harry showed no indication of following up that amazing introduction with anything else. He’d intended to scold Harry for not coming back to the common room last night after all. That had prompted more quiet mutters and shiftings of alliance. At least half of Slytherin, Draco thought, considered Harry afraid now, half-helpless in the face of Voldemort’s threat.

Harry swallowed the mouthful of pancake he’d taken, and replied, “Mortimer Belville. McGonagall and I questioned him under Veritaserum last night after I caught him trying to tamper with the food in the kitchens.” He rolled his eyes and snorted when Draco gave a nervous glance at his breakfast. “Don’t worry, I caught him before he could do anything. He said that he’d written two letters to Voldemort using the name Serpent—the name Burke had used. One was before Midwinter, and the other was a few days ago. He informed Voldemort that I considered him one of my allies, and that he should come to Hogwarts before Midsummer to prepare for the battle. It might have been one of the reasons that Voldemort decided to move and come to the school early, since he didn’t want all of my allies to have time to arrive.”

Only when Harry stabbed his fork down viciously did Draco realize how angry he was. Harry had rarely showed any emotion but compassion and quiet determination in the past few days, as if he didn’t want anyone to realize that their supposed savior could also feel rage. Although, Draco thought, as he watched Harry stab again, hard enough to make his fork skid and shriek on the plate, I suppose that could also be because he thinks he has to be some kind of ridiculous symbol to everyone, a saint or a martyr, someone perfect.

“Indigena Yaxley wrote him back,” Harry continued, after another few bites. “He was supposed to report what he could of my activities to Voldemort, and, of course, cause as much pain and trouble in Hogwarts itself as he could. He was the one who disabled the Floo connections.” Harry shook his head. “No wonder we couldn’t

recognize the spell. It was one he'd studied in some obscure book—and that's where he got the fact that all the Floo connections in Hogwarts are linked to the Headmistress's office, too. Ravenclaws."

That was loud enough to make half the Ravenclaw table glare at them. Draco nudged Harry with one elbow and nodded at them when he looked up. Harry, to Draco's intense, secret delight, glared instead of turning away or just bearing the glares as he had for the past few days, and the Ravenclaws were the ones who wound up averting their eyes in confusion.

"Can you repair the Floo connections, now that you know what spell did it?" Draco asked, and then could have kicked himself for phrasing the question that way. Harry didn't need more troubles piled onto his shoulders, as if he were the only one who could relieve them. Draco should have asked if McGonagall or the professors, the ones who would normally take care of those responsibilities, could do it.

Harry's face took on a disgusted expression. "No. He never looked up the countercurse. Hermione's volunteered to research in the Hogwarts library and see if she can find something, but I don't know if she will. I know we don't have the book Belville talked about."

Draco nodded. At least Granger's handling it, doing something actually useful, instead of expecting Harry to save her like the rest of them. As much as he hated to admit it, Gryffindor had been the House most supportive of Harry since the siege began, and the one to argue most vehemently against the idea of handing him over to Voldemort in hopes that the Dark Lord would keep his promise and leave the rest of them alone. The Slytherins outside of those already devoted to Harry were too busy thinking of the politics, the Hufflepuffs were mourning the greatest number of students killed from their House, and the Ravenclaws were returning to their old distrust of Harry with a vengeance. But between them, Potter, Granger, and the Weasleys were browbeating the rest of their House and dragging them along where they might have resisted, as well as urging the upper-year Gryffindors who'd never participated in the dueling club to attend.

"What's going to happen to Belville now?" he asked.

“That’ll wait until after the battle’s over,” said Harry. He swallowed a few more bites, then rose abruptly from the table. “I can’t eat any more right now,” he said, tossing his head like a restless horse. “Come on. I want to talk to Snape again. Maybe he needs help brewing the healing potions. And then I should visit the hospital wing and see if that girl who fell into the coma is awake yet.”

Draco stood, though he wanted to object that Harry should stay and finish his breakfast. He was too relieved to see that Harry had managed to put aside his guilt and self-loathing for the moment, though. Later, when the mood had had some time to settle in Harry, he would nag.

They made it to the middle of the Great Hall, Draco occasionally catching ripples of movement from the corner of his eye as the Rosier-Henlin twins followed under a concealment charm, and then the hex came flying from the Ravenclaw table.

Harry was turning to meet it before Draco recognized it, and the Rosier-Henlin twins were intoning *Protego* together, so that the hex crashed into three Shield Charms at once and dissolved. Harry stood in silence and looked for who had done it. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to. The expression on his face did that for him.

The Ravenclaws shuffled and shifted apart, and then a boy Draco thought was a seventh-year got shoved forward from the middle of them. He stumbled once, but regained his balance. Draco saw, from the corner of his eye, that Professor Flitwick was already on his way down from the head table, his wizened face looking even older than usual.

“Gorgon,” said Harry, his voice inflectionless. “Do you know, I did think that we’d taken care of our disagreement last year.”

Draco did know the boy. He’d insulted Harry in second year, been terrified of him in third, and dueled with him at the beginning of fourth. He managed to look frightened and sulky both at once now, and his eyes cut back and forth between Harry and his Head of House.

“Gorgon,” said Flitwick, halting a few feet away. “What excuse do you have for your behavior?”

Gorgon exploded, his fists clenching. “What excuse do you think I have?” he shouted. “He got my cousin killed, Professor! He did it because he was careless and an idiot and—and maybe he’s not a Dark Lord, but does that matter? He had some idiot plan to face You-Know-Who, and he just couldn’t leave the rest of us out of it! He had to do this, too!” Abruptly he straightened, eyes darkening further, and his next words came out like a whip tipped with malice.

“And actually,” he said, speaking to Flitwick, but with his gaze locked on Harry, “I heard something that makes me reconsider the accusation of Dark Lord, Professor. I heard someone saying that she looked over her shoulder when she was running to the castle and saw some of the first-years dying beside the lake. Harry here just hovered on his broom over Voldemort, and did nothing to save them. What good is he as the Boy-Who-Lived, if he can’t even face You-Know-Who the way he’s supposed to?” Murmurs of outrage began circling the room in the wake of his words.

Draco looked at Harry, and saw that his face had turned white. His own stomach was missing its bottom now. Shit. Someone saw. And if they know that Harry actually killed those children...

Gorgon looked pleased with the way he’d scored a hit on Harry, but Flitwick interrupted his triumph. “You will come with me to see the Headmistress at once, Gorgon.”

“What? We’re not allowed to speak the truth now, Professor, even on the edge of dying?” Gorgon demanded. “You’ll notice that he didn’t deny it!”

“We are not allowed to cast hexes on each other in a situation as desperate as this one.” The tiny little professor’s voice had grown markedly deeper, and Draco was reminded that he’d been a dueling champion in his day. “The Headmistress has forbidden it outside of actual dueling practice. I do not know which punishment she will choose for you, but I am sure it will be severe.”

He led the way out of the Great Hall. Gorgon followed, though he did dare a final scowl over his shoulder at Harry.

Draco looked at him warily. Harry swallowed once or twice, but nodded when Draco caught his eye.

“There are some people who are going to react that way,” he muttered. “Let’s go find Snape. I’m fine.”

No, you’re not, Draco thought in exasperation as he trailed Harry to the door, closely followed by the Rosier-Henlin twins. It’s one thing to know they blame you, and another to know they’re willing to hex you to exercise that blame. What if they do it again? What if someone finds out that you mercy-killed those children, Harry? Will you just stand there and let them curse you?

Connor might not know much. That was one thing Snape had told him whenever they dueled together: that he didn’t know much, even when he got one of the Light-based spells right. And he might not know that much about Potions, or Transfiguration, or Herbology, or in fact most of his school subjects. He might only be good at honesty, and flinging hexes, and compulsion, and flying.

But he knew this much.

“You’re being stupid,” he told his brother.

Harry paused and stared at him between strands of his fringe, which was matted and dripping with sweat. He’d tried to show Connor a fire-based spell that was supposed to seek out every scrap of wood on an enemy’s body and burn it—including a wand. Connor couldn’t yet master it. Harry had shown no sign of impatience, or of discouragement. He just went on showing it to Connor, over and over again, long after everyone else had left the Room of Requirement and gone to dinner.

It was six days into the siege, Thursday evening, and Connor knew how things stood now. Every day, more and more people in the school got angry at Harry, because they were stupid. He’d largely managed to keep such stupidity out of Gryffindor, because he made

everyone who wanted to say it back up his argument, and so far it always trailed off into mumbles of “but someone walking down the corridor’s best friend’s cousin’s sister said” and unfounded allegations about Harry practicing dark spells on helpless spiders in random corners. But it was deeply-rooted in Slytherin, and now it was beginning to affect Harry.

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Harry, in that monotonous steel voice that Connor hated. “This curse could save your life someday, and on Midsummer, the Light will be overhead. It’ll help you if you ask. You have to know this curse, Connor. I know you might not get it right tonight, but you will eventually.” He turned away and faced the far wall again, where a stuffed “wizard” made of cloth had lost every bit of wood it owned twice over. “Now. Like this. Ard—“

“You’re being stupid,” Connor cut in, determined to make Harry acknowledge him this time, “because no matter how much time you spend drilling and dueling and strategizing and catching traitors, there will always be someone who blames you, Harry.”

Harry’s shoulders stiffened. “I know that,” he said.

“Then fucking act like it!” Connor burst out, letting his temper have free reign. He knew Draco and Snape had tried to talk to Harry about this, but they were too content to back off and wait when Harry showed signs of pain, or said that he understood. Connor didn’t plan to. Serpents bite on the heel. Lions go for the throat. “Stop treating yourself like a Muggle machine! Stop flinching every time someone mutters about you having caused this! Stop worrying about them so much! We have to have you to win this siege and organize this battle, because you’re the only one who can face Voldemort, and that’s not even counting the people who want you to live because we love you and would prefer that you not die, please. Driving yourself to exhaustion won’t work, and you can’t go out there and offer yourself up!”

“What makes you think I would?”

Connor stepped towards him, seized his brother’s arm, and spun him around. Harry faced him, looking blank, his green eyes carefully

closed. But Connor knew this expression of old. It wasn't blank and it wasn't cold. It was the look Harry wore when he was being a stubborn dumbarse.

"Because I grew up with you, Harry," Connor snapped. "And I didn't know everything, but I noticed this. You acted this exact same way when James or Sirius or Remus said something that you wanted to think deeply about. You disappeared into yourself and let your body function on its own. I noticed because you always played your worst games of Quidditch on those days. And now I think you're working yourself up to go out there and try to settle this once and for all. Or, at least, you're not here, and you need to be here."

Harry blinked, and for a moment, Connor saw a glimpse of something human in his eyes. Then he whispered, "But it's sixty-four now," which made no sense at all, so Connor asked about it.

"What do you mean?"

"She died," Harry whispered. "The girl who went into the coma. Heloise Whitestag. She died this morning. And sixty-three people died on the battlefield. So that's sixty-four people dead now."

Connor cocked his head and waited, eyes narrow, sensing his brother wasn't done.

"Sixty-four people I've killed."

Connor gripped his shoulders and shook him. Harry's teeth jarred in his head, and when his head stopped bouncing, he gave his brother a look of abject astonishment.

"You. Are. Being. Stupid," said Connor, and resisted the impulse to slap Harry across the face when his stare only deepened. "You didn't kill them, Harry." Harry tried to interrupt, but he charged on. "No. I've heard those rumors about the lake, and I don't know what happened there. I'll wait until you're ready to tell me. But for Merlin's sake, Harry, stop brooding and come back. You're not going to give Voldemort what he wants. You know he'd slaughter us all even if you went out to him. You're not going to do that. Say you won't."

“Connor—“

He’s reluctant to swear. He was thinking about it. Connor was only thankful that he’d found out about this, and not Draco or Snape. They would have yelled. This didn’t need yelling, not now.

“Harry,” he said, and softened his voice, and gripped his brother’s shoulders so that he could stare into his eyes. “Say you won’t. Swear it to me.”

Harry stared at him.

“Swear it on Merlin and your magic,” Connor insisted.

Harry swallowed, closed his eyes, and said, “All right. I swear it on Merlin and my magic.”

Connor wrapped his arms around Harry and hugged the breath out of him. He felt Harry’s arms curve around him a moment later, and Harry let out one large sob, but not a flood of tears. Maybe that was a good thing. Maybe it wasn’t. But at least Connor had managed to avert what could have been his brother’s most painful stupidity.

“Good,” Connor muttered into his ear. “And in return, that oath and this particular piece of stupidity will remain between us.”

Harry nodded, his head moving lightly against Connor’s neck. Connor sighed, and hugged his brother one more time.

Anyone else, and he’d be the one reassuring him, he thought, stepping away so that he could draw his wand and practice the wood-burning curse again. But because it’s him, he thinks there should have been something more he could do, and some way to save us all before Midsummer.

Well, sometimes there’s just not.

Hawthorn hugged her daughter one-armed. “You’ll get through this, Pansy,” she whispered. “And, in the meantime, know that I am incredibly proud of you.”

Pansy nodded, and her hands flickered out from her sleeves, speaking in the sign language of the necromancers. Thank you, Mother. I promise that I won't do anything stupid. I'll only do what has to be done. I love you.

"That's my girl," Hawthorn said, and then she let her go, and watched as Pansy walked calmly out of the room. The black robes concealed her motions, her general shape, and her face, but she was still the daughter Hawthorn had raised. In spite of her reassurance, Hawthorn did not truly think she would turn from her path and break her oaths. She had kept silent when she knew that dozens of children would go forth from the school and die. She would get through the coming battle, too.

Hawthorn had long since settled with herself whether it was moral for a necromancer to keep silent when she knew that someone would die. Seers saw the future in uncertain terms, and made prophecies that could shift, but what a necromancer saw was inevitable. Telling would make no difference. Death was absolute, and people would die the way they would die.

She turned and drew the cover off the basin of warm water the house elves had brought her the moment she asked for it, no fuss and no questions. With a sigh, she bathed her left arm in the water, and frowned at the black skull and snake on her skin that was the reminder of an old, old foolishness.

For the last two nights, as the siege turned on through a week since its beginning—it was now Saturday afternoon—her Mark had been steadily darkening and burning. Hawthorn had known when her former Lord was summoning the Death Eaters before, but the pain had never been this bad before, and she feared some new evil. She had caught Adalrico's eye in the past day, and Snape's, and Peter Pettigrew's. Their faces were all grim. They all held their left arms as if they were tender. When pressed, Snape had admitted that he feared it might be something similar to what Regulus Black had suffered—an apparently infected Dark Mark. He had given Hawthorn

a potion that helped with the pain and advised her to bathe the Mark often.

Hawthorn was not sure what would halt the Mark's inflammation after the siege. Regulus Black had pursued some arcane method of healing not open to the rest of them. But she was confident that they would find some means of halting it. Snape was a Potions Master, and for the sake of old fellowship, he would share any solution he discovered with them. And Hawthorn herself was no slouch in Herbology, though nowhere near Indigena Yaxley's level. She could look to the plants of her estate, the Garden, after the siege.

After the siege.

The words could sound as if they described another universe, if she let them.

Hawthorn would not let them. She refused to regret when she felt the burning of the Mark, and think about what would happen if she had chosen to accept Fenrir Greyback's coercion and join in the effort to resurrect the Dark Lord three years ago; she certainly refused to surrender. She did not bow to intimidation.

She narrowed her eyes, and knew a small growl was bubbling in her throat.

Of any kind.

She had received a letter from Lupin last week, just before she prepared to Apparate to Hogsmeade. He had detailed his choices in the matter of Loki's pack, laid out the laws against werewolves and the worsening situation, and begged her to come and join him. He hadn't wanted her to know beforehand because he feared she would betray the plans to Harry, but now that he knew anyway, Lupin wanted Hawthorn to consider that she had a choice to acknowledge herself as a lycanthrope.

I choose to define myself, Hawthorn thought, as she watched the water begin to boil around her Mark. I am not a brand on my arm, and I am not a bite on my neck. I follow no master, and I follow no Lord. I

give my loyalty where I choose, and I am a pureblood witch, and a mother, and a widow, and part of Harry's circle.

She pulled her arm free of the water and called aloud for another bowl, which had a house elf appear, bowing, at once. Hawthorn thought she rather scared it, since she knew her eyes were flashing amber and the hair on her body was standing up, and she looked as frightening as a werewolf could so near the dark of the moon.

That did not matter, though.

I am myself. I will not back down. I will think in terms of 'after the siege' if I choose to.

And I will go about tomorrow, find the source of this nonsense saying Harry should surrender himself, and put a stop to it.

"Do you think you can really expand the illusion enough to cover all the horses?" Harry asked Honoria dubiously. He had to admit, he hadn't considered using her glamours as a major part of the attack before. He knew she was good with tiny illusions, even good enough to use them unconsciously and in great detail, but the horses would blaze in the storm of the Light and would make quite a lot of noise as they charged. Harry thought even a master illusionist would be hard put to cover that.

Honoria only grinned at him. Currently, she wore an illusion that made her hair look short and black, and her robes flashed with distracting letters in various colors. Harry didn't know why, except that she'd wanted it that way. "I promise, Harry," she said, "I can cover anything you want me to."

Harry nodded, slowly. "All right. But I'll want you to practice before we actually get into the battle."

"Of course!" Honoria looked around at the Room of Requirement, which at the moment resembled a place for planning strategy, with a round table in the middle and the walls covered with maps of Hogwarts. "What do you want me to make this look like?"

“Surprise me,” said Harry.

Honorio nodded and closed her eyes, a tiny line furrowing her brow. A moment later, the Room around them vanished, and they were tumbling through the air, in freefall, with the fires of the Death Eater camp beneath them and getting closer all the time.

Harry swore and grabbed for some handhold despite himself. It felt incredibly real, and not only visually. He could hear voices beneath him, the rush of passing air, and Honorio’s exultant laughter. He could feel the wind in his hair and the turning of his body, too, so thick that his brain kept insisting he was falling. The smell of cooking drifted up to him.

Then the vision of sky and camps was gone, and they sat in the Room of Requirement once more, with Honorio gazing at him innocently.

Harry found his voice on the third try. “You’re right. It will more than do.” He was even more impressed than he was letting on. Ordinary illusionists could create sensory effects of all kinds. But to coordinate them so that they struck at the same time and formed a seamless picture took incredible skill.

Honorio stood up and clapped her hands, the illusion around her hair melting to reveal her ordinary bright curls again. “Thank you!” she said, and hurried out of the Room, leaving Harry alone.

He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. Exhaustion pounded through him once again. It had nothing to do with ordinary weariness of the body; he’d slept in Slytherin last night, from just after nine at night until well after six, and “shown” everyone who would take the hint that he wasn’t afraid of the shifting currents in his own House.

But worry and anxiety were taking their toll. The battle was in four days, five if one counted the Sunday now half past. Voldemort had still not made a move on the castle, but Midsummer’s steady nearing, and the announcement about his granting the other students safe passage if Harry came down to him—repeated every morning, now—

meant he didn't have to. Fear feasted in the castle, more ravenously than a pack of Peter's rats. Sidelong glances came at Harry from the most unexpected people, including Blaise and some of the others he'd trained with in the dueling club. He could see the promise whispering in their brains. Just give him up. Just give him up and we are safe.

And the words had taken hold in his own brain, as Connor had somehow managed to see on Thursday. Harry had to wonder if there wasn't something he could do to insure that Voldemort kept his promise.

I could trick him into swearing an Unbreakable Vow. That was the sanest of the many plans, mad as a fever dream, that had assaulted him so far. And Harry knew they were mad, even as he entertained them. He was the only one who could face Voldemort. He knew it. He had to stay within the castle, no matter how much others might want him out.

But their fear, and the idea that if he was such a hero and the Boy-Who-Lived he should do something about this, and the urge to do anything rather than increase the numbers pounding in his head, all dragged at him like puppies with a rag between their teeth. Shouldn't he do something? Was his reluctance only because he knew that people who loved him would be upset to see him die, and because he had, perhaps, corrupted himself more than he knew by killing those dozen children near the lakeside? What if Snape was wrong, and he was right? He had changed himself, crossed a chasm he could never cross back over, by killing those children. He had stepped onto a path that would lead him to become Dumbledore, in the end.

If he went down to Voldemort, if he struck, if he tried to end it now and the prophecy was with him, then at least the world might be spared two Dark Lords, or a Dumbledore with absorbere abilities.

"Harry."

He sat up quickly. He hadn't thought someone could enter the Room without his knowing it, but then, he didn't know everything about the Room of Requirement.

Vera stared at him for long moments, then shook her head. "You have another hole torn in your soul," she whispered. "Why did you not come to me?"

"Because I needed to fight through this on my own," said Harry. "I needed to think about it. I have to look at what I did through my eyes, and not just others'. Of course other people are going to tell me that I did the only thing I could, because they want to keep me alive. But I have to decide for myself if this is a crime deserving death."

He blinked when he finished. He hadn't realized until he said it that he had thought of going to Voldemort as much like an execution as like a sacrifice.

Vera took a seat on the floor opposite him, folding her legs under her. "You did something horrible," she said softly. "And it was the only thing you could do."

Harry shook his head. "You can only see the effects on me," he said. "You can't see the thing itself."

"I read your conflicting motivations better than you read them," Vera said, with no sign that she'd been insulted. From what he'd seen of her, Harry almost thought the Seer was incapable of feeling anger. "You know, at bottom, that surrendering yourself is not a choice. You know the true prophecy, and you know that someone must stand at your right shoulder when you face Voldemort."

Harry shifted, and shrugged one shoulder. "Maybe not. My brother might be the one destined to defeat him instead."

"You do not really believe that, either," Vera told him quietly. "You do not know how he could love the whole of the wizarding world. And I have seen him, and he does not—not yet. If the time can come when he can fulfill that part of the prophecy, it is long hence."

Harry lowered his eyes.

"Your soul is shredded, and you are falling back into old habits of thought, that you yourself are evil and deserving of punishment in situations where you will excuse others." Vera reached out and cupped his chin, turning his eyes up to meet hers again. "I do not have enough time to heal you now," she added, voice a dying fall. "But I hope that you will let me try, when this battle is done with—and that you will not kill yourself in the meantime, because you have deluded yourself into thinking you deserve it."

Harry hesitated, then swallowed and said, "I—I haven't told anyone yet, but I had planned to go to the Sanctuary for the summer."

The smile that crossed Vera's smile was warmer than the sunrise. "That is a wonderful idea, Harry," she murmured. "That would be part of the reason that you are so determined to drive Voldemort from the battlefield bleeding?"

Harry nodded. "I couldn't leave the wizarding world for as long as I need to if he was still active and sending his Death Eaters on raids. But if I wound him as badly as I'm planning, he won't dare show his head for months. I am going to make him hurt." His hand was clenched so tightly into a fist on his knee that it hurt, itself. Harry took a deep breath and forced it to relax. "And then I can go to the Sanctuary. I need to get past the lingering traces of these soul-wounds I bear. I'll bring Snape and Draco with me if they want to come, and if they would be welcome."

"Your Malfoy and the Bitter One are more than welcome," said Vera. "And I wish you good luck in the battle. Do not kill yourself, for then I would never see you healed, and that would be a tragedy." She leaned nearer and let her dry lips brush his cheek, then stood. "Do not drive yourself to madness, either. The grief and fear of those around you is understandable, but it is, in the end, grief and fear, not rational thought. Allow them to feel emotions in peace, but not to control your actions."

Harry watched her until she left, and then bowed his head and rested it on his arms for a long moment.

Maybe I can get through this. Maybe I can. More, maybe I'll deserve to get through this, if I try very hard.

Those words ran on the surface of his mind. Underneath it ran another mantra.

Sixty-four. Nineteen. Sixty-four. Nineteen. Sixty-four. Nineteen. Millicent stared in silence at the dark specks in her father's hand. Then she raised her eyes to his face.

"Does Harry know you have those?" Her voice was smooth and calm and normal. She congratulated herself on it. She would have felt even better if she hadn't felt the need, a moment later, to put her hand out and clutch the wall of the room where her father was staying, once a Defense professor's quarters.

"Of course not," said Adalrico, and put the specks—the Black Plague spores, Millicent corrected herself; she could call things by their true name—back into his robe pocket. "He would forbid me from using them, if he knew. Quite right and proper for the ethical side not to use disease magic."

Millicent watched him carefully. Adalrico sounded—odd. Different. He was rubbing his left arm, and she knew why, so that wasn't the difference. He prowled back and forth from the bed to the room's far wall, and all the while his free hand opened and closed, opened and closed again, as if he didn't know what to do with himself.

"Father?" she ventured at last. "What's wrong?"

"This is all wrong!" Adalrico exploded, spinning around. Millicent noticed him stumble as his weak foot came down, but he recovered in moments and shook his head impatiently at her, so she stayed where she was. "We need to be fighting poison with poison. I know I could reach a few of the Death Eaters from the walls, if McGonagall would drop the wards for one moment. I would give them fear. But she won't, because she is too worried about some of the students getting hurt." He slapped his hands together, snarling. "This is war! They're already

hurt! They've seen other students die in front of them. I think it's time that my old comrades saw some of their own die."

"You think Harry should be harsher," Millicent summarized. She should have known this was coming, she thought, reflecting back on little hints her father had been dropping all week. This was Monday, the tenth day of the Dark Lord's siege. She supposed she should be grateful he'd held back from snapping as long as he had.

"Of course he should be," said Adalrico. "Make the other side suffer, the other side sacrifice. That is the way to fight a Dark Lord. It is the way we fought Dumbledore, when I was a Death Eater." His hand slid up and down his left arm in a soothing motion. "Show them that you mean to kill them, and continue killing them until they withdraw from the battlefield. Harry is too hesitant, too gentle. He makes the Dark Lord believe that he can conquer us, and he can. He will destroy us unless we prepare ourselves to carry the battle to him."

"I think we're doing that," said Millicent, feeling as if she watched a stranger. She knew her father was crueller than most people, far crueller than Harry, but watching him actually prepare to betray a formal family alliance was madness. Has he forgotten that that scar on his arm will burst open and bleed him to death if he betrays Harry?

"On Midsummer," said Adalrico. "And what is the point of waiting until then? Why not break the siege now, and charge?"

"Because a storm of Light is coming on Midsummer," said Millicent. "And it will help the Light allies Harry's assembled."

"We should not wait," Adalrico insisted. "We should attack now."

Millicent stood very straight. She felt three loyalties pulling and tugging at her: loyalty to her father, loyalty to Harry, and loyalty to her family. But two of them were pulling in the same direction.

"I am going to Harry now," she said, "unless you swear by our name that you will not attack the Death Eaters on your own."

Adalrico spun around and stared at her. “What?” he asked at last, his voice soft with disbelief.

“You heard me,” said Millicent. She felt light-headed, but she had no doubt that this was the right thing to do. “We swore to him, Father. The honor of our family is at stake. And he is my leader, my vates—if you want to put it that way, my Lord. You are doing this because of your own impatience, not because it’s the right thing to do.”

For a long moment, there was only the sound of noisy breathing. Millicent was vaguely surprised to realize that some of it was her own.

Then her father said, “And is that not betraying the honor of our family, Millicent? To turn on your own father?”

“Not when you would be the one to do wrong by the Bulstrode name,” Millicent retorted, and took a step forward. “I’ve watched Draco’s father lose his grip on the Malfoy honor slowly, because his son knows what Harry is better than he does. I don’t intend to let you lead us down that same rocky path, Father. Swear now, or I go now.” She let a shimmer of black run around her fist, just in reminder to her father that she was his magical heir and could use any of the gifts that he possessed to stop her.

Adalrico held her eyes. She held them, and stared back.

Then he stepped close to her, swept her up in an embrace, and murmured into her hair, “I swear by our name that I will not attack the Death Eaters.”

Millicent managed to relax, her head spinning. She put her arms around her father in return and held him. She was already almost as tall as he was.

“My daughter,” Adalrico whispered. “My heir. I am so proud.”

And that is what being Bulstrode means, Millicent thought. We endure, and we do not falter, no matter what the test.

Hermione paused in her reading of the latest book and wiped her eyes for a moment. They were watering. She’d been reading since

dinner the night before, and because not even Madam Pince was going to chase her out of the library under these circumstances, she'd read straight through the night. She thought it was somewhere around dawn now.

Dawn on Tuesday, her helpful calendar-voice piped up to remind her. And the battle begins on Friday.

She bent back over the book with a vengeance. There had to be a way to restore blocked Floo connections somewhere. She was determined that it should exist. This book was a dense history of the way the Floo Network had been first established, and how Floo powder worked. Her eyes ran easily over the long, complex sentences, untangling them.

A pair of hands came to rest on her shoulders, and began to massage. Hermione resisted the pressure for a moment, but then leaned back with a sigh and a groan, and let her head roll to one side, so that her cheek rested on one of the stroking hands.

"You shouldn't read all through the night like that," Zacharias whispered into her ear. "You'll strain your eyes and get dark circles under them, and then where would you be, a pretty girl like you?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Hermione, fighting the urge to close her eyes. "I suppose I'd have to fall back on my intelligence."

Zacharias went on rubbing her shoulders for a moment, then pulled out the chair next to her and sat down. Assuming he'd come to keep her company, Hermione started to turn back to her book, but he claimed her hand. Startled, she turned to look at him.

She was even more startled when he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. The expression on his face was utterly serious.

"Hermione," he whispered. "I never understood before just how stupid blood prejudice was."

Hermione blinked. What brought this on?

“They want to kill you,” Zacharias went on earnestly, gesturing towards the walls. Hermione reflected that even when he spoke as if life and death mattered, he was still pompous; it didn’t seem to have occurred to him that she knew that. “Not because you hurt them, not because you took a political office away from someone, not because you’re better at magic than they are, but just because you’re—you. And that’s wrong, and it’s stupid, and I’m sorry I never really realized it before. I’m sorry.”

Hermione reached out and hugged him, closing her eyes as she felt him kiss her neck. She kept them closed, so that she wouldn’t let the tears gathering behind her lids roll down her face.

“I love you,” Zacharias whispered.

Hermione nodded, choking on sobs of exhaustion and fury and sadness, unable to respond for right now. She didn’t fight when he gently pushed the book away from her and led her back to Gryffindor Tower.

Snape had been on edge most of the day. That could have something to do with Madam Pomfrey at last having enough potions to ease the pain of those students still in the hospital wing—including Calming Draughts to dose those who had suddenly become Squibs thanks to the Dark Lord—and so not requiring his skills. It could have something to do with this being Wednesday, the nineteenth of June, two days before the solstice and almost the last day of the promised time Voldemort had granted the school to deliver Harry up to him.

It almost certainly had to do with several potions ingredients gone missing from his store, the locking spells undone by a fairly complicated Dark Arts curse.

Snape had, of course, cast several spells that should provide him with images of those who had crept into his offices and “liberated” the ingredients. He had expected to see the Weasley twins. He had not expected there to be no images at all. Another Dark Arts curse had insured that every tracking spell would fail, including the ones Snape had chosen.

The ingredients gone were asphodel, wormwood, valerian roots, and sopophorous beans—the ones that made the Draught of Living Death.

Snape had gone at once to McGonagall, but when he had told her what she suspected, she had, her mouth tightening, agreed that he should not announce the theft to the school. Instead, she would join him in the place most likely to reveal the students who had taken it. So they were now both waiting, quietly, Snape under a Vanishing Potion and McGonagall in her Animagus form, at opposite ends of the corridor that held the Slytherin common room.

Snape knew, unfortunately for his students, what House that particular skill at Dark Arts was most likely to belong in.

He even thought he might know why the thieves had chosen to brew that particular potion. He wanted to be wrong, however, and if he was, then he need only embarrass his Slytherins instead of—

Instead of do something worse.

His thoughts cut off as the door to the common room opened. Blaise Zabini's head poked out, and he glanced up and down the corridor. Then he nodded and looked back over his shoulder.

"It's clear," Snape saw him mouth.

He could see McGonagall half-close her eyes so that the light from the torches wouldn't reflect in them as two of the seventh-year students, including one of the prefects, who had been in Snape's NEWT Potions class, stepped out of the common room with a bundled shape over their shoulders. If one wasn't looking for it, it would appear to be a set of blankets and a pillow, as if Blaise and his friends were heading to the Great Hall to make a common sleeping pallet among numerous other students. More and more people did so every night, finding their common rooms too claustrophobic and isolated. Snape was sure the three had counted on the deception to save them if anyone saw them on the way. They'd even added glamours to make it look as if the blankets had long, tasseled ends.

As Snape flicked his wand and dismissed the glamours, the hair poking out of one end of the blanket came into view. It was black, extremely messy hair.

White-hot rage consumed him, aided, it seemed, by the throbbing pain in his left arm. He had to fight to keep from simply sending the Killing Curse at Blaise and having done with it. Instead, he sipped the antidote to the Vanishing Potion at the same moment as the Headmistress changed back and said in an extremely cold voice, "Mr. Zabini, Mr. Findarin, Mr. Tipperary, what do you think you are doing?"

Blaise spun around and stared at McGonagall in shock. Findarin and Tipperary were a bit smarter. They raised a Shield Charm against any hexes that McGonagall might cast, then turned and started hurrying up the corridor away from her—

Only to find their Head of House visible again, and waiting for them. They stopped running, and the bundle nearly slipped off their shoulders. Snape waved his wand and caught it with a Levitation Charm, floating it to his feet. He slit the blankets open with his wandless magic. Harry's face, slack with the Draught of Living Death, appeared as the blankets uncoiled from around him.

Snape had to breathe several times to clear the red haze from his vision. He had thought that someone might be arranging to kidnap a student, but he had imagined the victim would be a Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, or Ravenclaw lured into his House's territory and made a scapegoat for Slytherin's increasing frustration with the siege. That there would be people in his own House who would turn on Harry...

It was a good thing McGonagall was here, he thought dimly, as he turned back to hear the explanation. A very good thing. Or he would have killed them. He could feel the words *Avada Kedavra* waiting at the back of his tongue, and had to concentrate on not saying them.

Blaise had started "explaining" by then. "It was just a prank, Professor," he said innocently, eyes wide. "We were going to put him in the Great Hall and laugh at him when he woke up in a strange place tomorrow—"

"You are lying, Mr. Zabini." The Headmistress could make her voice a whip when she wanted to, Snape admitted. "With any other student, I might accept that as an explanation, but not with Harry. You were going to take him to Voldemort."

Blaise fisted his hands and didn't respond.

"Mr. Zabini?" McGonagall asked. "Or do we need Veritaserum?"

"Fine!" Blaise shouted. He was shaking. Snape saw the frustration and the rage and the effect of twelve cumulative days of pent-up emotion running through him. "Yes, we bloody well were! I've been taking to my mum with the communication spell Malfoy taught me, and she wants me home, and she doesn't trust Harry to win the battle, and I'm—we're all so fucking tired of this! If we give him up, then we can leave!"

"And did you truly believe that Voldemort would keep his promise, Mr. Zabini?" McGonagall's voice was a hiss. Snape stooped and drew out the antidote to the Living Death that he'd prepared, pouring it into Harry's open mouth and massaging his throat to be sure he swallowed. Harry blinked his eyes open a moment later, looking drowsy and puzzled.

"He might!" Blaise yelled back. "Anything's better than this hell we're living through right now!"

Harry heard. Snape saw his eyes close, and his body jolt as though someone had just slapped him everywhere. Then he got slowly to his feet, swaying and wincing. Snape seized his arm.

"How did they get it to you?" he whispered.

"A glass of butterbeer," Harry replied, his voice tired, his eyes on Blaise. He ignored Findarin and Tipperary, who were cowering in place. "Everyone in the House was drinking one, except Blaise, who wasn't there. Even they—" he jerked his head at the seventh-years "—took one. I think Blaise must have had the antidote on him. When he came back, he gave it to them. But I remember most people falling asleep in the moments before I felt the potion overcoming me." He

was silent a moment, then said, "He really meant to turn me over to Voldemort?"

"Yes," said Snape.

"Oh," said Harry, and then turned and pressed his face into Snape's robes, and said nothing more. Snape stroked his hair, eyes on his former seventh-years, and on McGonagall, who appeared to have heard all she wanted to of Blaise's story.

She Stunned all three of them briskly, then nodded to Snape. "I'll put them in the room off my office," she said. It had turned into a temporary holding cell for the captured Death Eaters and Belville, as much to keep them from the wrath of the general Hogwarts populace as anything else. "Wake your students up, and then talk to Harry."

Snape nodded, and stood aside so that she could stride up the corridor with the three bound students floating behind her. Blaise's face was still frozen into an expression of panic-stricken anger. Snape studied the Headmistress's expression, thinking she would be weary about having to do this to her students, but it appeared to have only pissed her off.

"Harry?" Snape touched his—yes, he could admit it in the privacy of his own head, his son's hair—and made Harry look up at him. "I didn't brew enough antidote for everyone. I thought I would only be dealing with one or possibly two victims of the Draught. Let's wake up Draco and a few of the other most skilled Potions students. Will you help me brew more of the antidote after that?"

Harry's eyes showed naked gratitude for the chance to put off discussing what Blaise had done. "Yes," he said.

Snape nodded and strode towards the Slytherin common room, his arm and his temper both still burning. At least anger was a distraction from the fear that he could have lost Harry permanently.

One more day.

Behind him, he heard Harry murmuring to himself. When Snape listened, it sounded like a sequence of numbers. "Sixty-four. Nineteen. Three. Sixty-four. Nineteen. Three."

"What is that?" Snape asked, after he had given the password and the door swung back.

Harry jumped, then stared at him, eyes shuttering. "Nothing," he said.

Snape raised an eyebrow, but let it go as he gazed at the common room full of his sleeping House. It is not nothing, and we will discuss it in good time, Harry, as we will young Mr. Zabini's attitude. Be assured we will.

Chapter Eighty-Nine: Tomorrow We Leave For Battle

Harry opened his eyes slowly, not realizing where he was for a long moment. Then he remembered. Snape had told him to sleep on the couch in his private quarters last night, not trusting the rest of Slytherin House to take care of him.

Harry winced at the memories of Snape's precise, cold voice as he lectured on House loyalty, and the lowered eyes of the other Slytherins. It really hadn't been their fault, any of them. Blaise, Findarin, and Tipperary had had to feed them the Draught of Living Death as well, just in case they might have tried to interfere with their kidnapping of Harry. Yes, some of them might have stood aside and let them take Harry to Voldemort, but some of them might have stopped Blaise and his friends. They would never know now.

Since he was fully awake, his mind began reciting the numbers again.

Sixty-four dead. Nineteen without magic. Three I frightened enough to try and take me to Voldemort.

He sat up, stretched, and pulled his glasses from a nearby table before he realized that Snape was sitting on the chair opposite, watching him and sipping a cup of tea. Harry jumped and stared at him. Snape waved his wand, still saying nothing, and a tray bearing tea and a bowl of cornflakes with a cup of milk close at hand floated over to him.

"Eat," he said. "I've fetched this food from the Great Hall for you. It's morning," he added, anticipating Harry's next question, "and Voldemort has already made his announcement about wanting the school to turn you over to him. This time, McGonagall countered with an announcement of her own, explaining what had happened last night. Everyone now knows that the Headmistress thinks such betrayal dishonorable, and how disappointed she is in any House that could consider it. You will be guarded today to make sure that does not happen again." Snape sipped his tea and watched until Harry poured the milk into the cornflakes and started eating just to get away from his stare.

Sixty-four, said the sound of his own chewing in his ears as he ate.

"Where's Draco?" he asked, when he'd swallowed a few mouthfuls.

"I sent him back to Slytherin after my speech," said Snape, and drank some more tea. "I knew he would wish to guard you and speak with you, but a large part of that speaking will be apologies that he did not recognize the taste of Living Death in time. It cannot help you now."

Harry stiffened for a moment, but Snape followed that with nothing more ominous, so he forced himself to eat some more cornflakes, and even drink a bit of his own tea. Nineteen, said the swish of the liquid in the cup.

"What will help me?" he asked a few minutes later.

"Being talked out of this guilt that you are carrying," said Snape. "I thought I had managed it. I thought Draco had managed it. I thought your own mind had managed it. Alas, it seems that we have not." His voice was without inflection, but Harry could hear the steel underneath.

"I don't know what you mean," said Harry. "I accept, as you said, that those who didn't face such a decision can't understand why I did as I did. And I know that Blaise and the others betrayed me out of fear for their lives, and not because of something I did." Three, said the shuffle of his shoes on the floor.

Snape made a muffled sound oddly like a chuckle. Harry laid down his spoon and stared at him. Snape stared back, and if there was amusement in his face, it was a cruel, predatory, hawk-like amusement.

"How many times have I told you, Harry," Snape said softly, "you cannot lie to a Legilimens?"

"I am not lying—"

"I heard you counting last night," Snape said unapologetically. "I believe I know the numbers. Sixty-four dead, counting Miss Whitestag.

Nineteen without magic, turned into Squibs. And three members of your own House who turned on you. People who have accepted responsibility for their own decisions, Harry, do not recite numbers like that to themselves.”

“I have accepted—“

“You have not.” The only sign of Snape’s anger, besides the force in his voice, was the way he suddenly released his teacup and pointed his hand at Harry. Wandless magic kept the teacup hovering in midair. Harry wondered if Snape was even aware of that. “You are making the dead more important than the living, the wounded more important than the whole, those who blame you more important than those who do not. You are living exclusively in their company, and by doing so you betray us.”

Harry felt as if he’d been punched in the gut. He looked away from Snape and tried to explain what he meant, what he felt. “If I forget about them, then I’m betraying their memory—“

“I have no interest in listening to your tired self-justifications,” said Snape, voice as cold as Harry remembered it being from first year. “You are betraying us, Harry, with every breath you take that is focused more on doom than on survival, with every glance you give that looks on the past as if that is somehow a sacred country. Tomorrow we leave for battle. We may fail because Voldemort is the stronger, or because Death Eaters kill us. I will not have us fail because our leader is distracted and dreaming of his own guilt instead of how best to protect us.”

Harry shivered. The words had cut him like shards of ice or glass. “I—I can’t watch anyone else die because of me,” he whispered.

“Then announce that now,” said Snape, his voice pitiless, “and turn the leadership of the war effort over to McGonagall. Tell your allies that you’ve failed them. Tell them that you are afraid, and because of that, you’d rather walk out and give yourself up to the Dark Lord, because you cannot bear to see death. You would rather commit suicide, make yourself a martyr, then endure what is a natural consequence of war. And, before you go, make sure to tell the

Sorting Hat that it made a mistake. It should have put you in Gryffindor after all—save that now, not even they are squalling about martyrdom.”

Harry clenched his hand. Emotions were blowing through him like winds, and he wasn't their container, but a leaf tossed about in them. He couldn't identify all of them. Fear was the predominant gale, though. “Don't you understand?” he insisted. “Bringing Voldemort here was a mistake. I should have set up a trap for him elsewhere. I had no right to endanger the life of anyone who didn't volunteer to be in the war. All those who've suffered so far were innocent. And I killed twelve of them myself—“

Snape laughed. Harry flinched again, certain he was hearing the boy who had flung devastating insults at James and the other Marauders in their sixth and seventh years.

“Be sure to tell Voldemort that,” Snape mocked, his eyes on fire with darkness. “Be sure to tell him that every victim who suffers as a result of this war is your fault. Be sure to tell him that war should only be between those who have agreed to suffer in it, so that they can bid their families properly farewell, and wave their hands, and go out to die after their morning tea. This is war, Harry. The Dark Lord does not care, he has never cared, about who is innocent and who is not. He prefers the innocent as victims, in fact, because they are so much less likely to fight back. And I am sure he would rejoice to know that his greatest enemy is tearing himself apart over a dozen dead children, rather than concentrating on saving the hundreds of living children still trapped in Hogwarts.”

Harry was breathing faster now. And he knew that one of the emotions howling through him was anger. But what Snape was saying was still wrong, still had to be wrong.

“I'm like Dumbledore if I use numbers,” he said, “if I say that the lives in Hogwarts are worth more than the lives of those children who died on the battlefield, just because there are more of them.”

“Has it occurred to you,” said Snape, voice descending to a rumbling purr like that of some great hunting cat, “that even Dumbledore was

right when he began? He lost himself slowly to the mantra, the idea, of sacrifice. He made decisions in the First War that led to the loss of a small number of lives to save a greater. That is true. And tell me, Harry, would you say it is right to save the lives of twelve children over nine hundred? That is approximately how many students remain in the school right now. Would you trade them for those dozen first-years and second-years, if you had the choice to make again?"

Put like that, it did sound impossible. Harry shook his head, though. "Did Dumbledore ever kill a dozen people himself?" he asked. "Did he kill a dozen children?"

Snape's mouth parted slightly, and his eyes glittered. He whispered, "What do you think had to be done with the children when the Children's Massacre was discovered?"

Harry swallowed.

"There were spells cast on them to make them remain alive," Snape continued. "The official story, of course, is that they died when their rescuers tried to take them from the crucifixes. That is not true. The truth is that Dumbledore, and the others who came with him, had to end those spells and release them to death, because their wounds were mortal. They killed them out of mercy. Ask Minerva about the Massacre, Harry. Ask her what it was like to stare into the eyes of more than a dozen children as she took them down from their crucifixes and ended their lives, that she might end their suffering. The cowards in that situation were those who stayed behind because they refused to be responsible for the death of a child, not those who took those deaths on themselves and sent them where they would hurt no longer."

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. Then he said, "You told me that that kind of courage wasn't something a Gryffindor would understand. To—have to make that kind of decision. But McGonagall made that kind of decision after the Children's Massacre?"

"Not all Gryffindors, I should have said."

Harry took a deep breath and looked at Snape again.

“Do you see what your guilt will cost us?” Snape asked. “If Minerva let herself be incapacitated by the guilt that some children died under her care, she could not lead the rest of the school and tend to the living. She feels the emotion, but the time to let it wash over her is not now. She will wait until she may indulge it. And in this, Harry, she is wiser than you are, because you are indulging your pained and aching conscience now, at the expense of the pained and aching people around you.”

“But I—but I could hurt them,” Harry whispered. “I have hurt them. Even if I get through the battle, shouldn’t I go to Tullianum on murder charges?”

Snape lunged forward, grabbing his shoulder and shaking him fiercely. Harry squeaked in surprise and mortification. Snape was the third person in two weeks who had shaken him, and Harry was beginning to feel like a naughty child.

“Do not think that way,” Snape said fiercely. “Or every wizard who fights with you tomorrow should go to Tullianum on murder charges, Harry.”

Harry lowered his head. Snape caught his chin and tilted his face upward again, so that he had to face those intent black eyes.

“What is it about this that troubles you so much?” Snape whispered. “That they were children? That this was the first act of war in which you had to make a decision you did not know was right? That others blame you? That last should be no surprise. That second was something you must have known you would have to do someday. And as for the first, there are children here in Hogwarts as well, Harry, some of them younger than your victims, still alive. They are more valuable than the dead. The living are always more valuable than the dead. They matter more. They have the possibility to change, to redeem themselves—and to live after this battle is done. Will you fail them because you are too busy memorializing those who can no longer hear you?”

Harry shivered. He felt chills tearing him apart, chills from so many disparate emotions that he was no longer even prepared to say that fear and anger were among them.

“We go to battle tomorrow,” Snape said again, voice a concentrated force of rage. “Will you abandon us to face Voldemort alone because you must hide your head in mourning? Will you let children die because children have already died? Will you let the Dark Lord kill us?”

“No!”

Harry’s vision became sheened with blue as the phoenix fire exploded from him, and his emotions coalesced as one, righteous anger. Snape pulled back at once, though the flames had not burned him. He eyed the aura that surrounded Harry, and there was a look of grim satisfaction on his face.

Harry was breathing hard. This rage was a precious thing, and he hung onto it. He still could not be entirely sure, whatever Snape had said, that he had done the right thing. He did not understand how anyone could have that certainty about an act of war like this, and he envied McGonagall’s seeming ability to go on living her life as normal after it. Perhaps he would talk to her, when this was done, and get some kind of advice about not letting a war wound define one’s life.

For now, though, they did have a battle to fight.

And he could see, if he accepted Snape’s stinging words as truth, the way that others must have seen him—Draco, and Connor, and the Ravenclaws who stared at him with doubt in their eyes, and the Hufflepuffs who had whispered in his wake, and the Slytherins who might have agreed with Blaise about the need to give him up. If he was this deep in mourning, if he cared about no one but the dead, then perhaps he wasn’t going to save them, and then why shouldn’t they take their chances with Voldemort? A weak savior offered them no options.

You were the one who told Voldemort to come to Hogwarts. You were the one who insured that a battle on Midsummer Day, and not just a storm, would happen in the first place.

So fucking act like it.

Harry almost smiled when he realized that that last sentence was in his brother's voice, and then he set about expanding his Occlumency pools to trap his guilt and sadness and fear. They could not interfere right now. They had no place on the battlefield. As Snape had said, it was anger and a desire to see everyone around him live that would get them through.

How had he so thoroughly forgotten his own lessons? Put your head down and endure. Shove forward, no matter how much it hurts.

The battle was the task for right now. Everything else, including the justified accusations that he would face when his murder of a dozen children became public knowledge, would have to wait. Voldemort was certainly not going to politely stand aside while Harry contacted the parents of his victims and told them to do whatever they liked to him.

When that moment comes that they know, his conscience whispered, it will be a harder test than this.

Harry acknowledged that, and put the realization aside. It would happen, but he could not allow it to dominate his actions for now. And if he had to lock and chain his emotions artificially with the Occlumency Snape had taught him, then he would. He had already planned to go to the Sanctuary this summer, because he had begun to wonder what unhealed mental wounds would cost him in the war. Now there was a more urgent need for healing, but it could wait.

He looked up, and caught Snape's eye. "Thank you, sir," he said.

Snape sneered at him. "You should have known better than to fall into a pattern," he said. "Or, barring that, you should have come to me at once."

"I know that now, sir."

Snape shook his head. "When this is finished, Harry, I think you should devote your summer to making sure such emotions will never incapacitate you again."

"That's why I've arranged with Vera to go to the Sanctuary, sir," said Harry, and had the supreme satisfaction of seeing Snape choke. He smiled and stood up, still blazing with the phoenix fire. "I'm going to meet with my allies now, just to make sure they all understand their part in the battle. Can I borrow some Veritaserum, so that I can make sure there are no traitors among them?"

Snape rose and fetched the vials of Veritaserum without a word, all the while staring at him as if he had become a different person. Harry smiled at him, pressed his hand—the flames wouldn't burn anyone he didn't tell them to—and then left. For the first time in days, a list of tasks was unfolding in his head, a sign that he was back to normal now, and could think of what he was supposed to be doing.

Meet with my allies and make sure they're true. Set up those older students who are going to stay in the school and protect the younger children. Pass the phoenix fire through the stone again, and purify the last of that foul magic—and make sure that Draco and Snape know what I'm doing this time. Speak with Tybalt, and insure that he does have his linchpin ready. Speak with the Malfoys, and see if they're coming to the battle tomorrow...

"You're happy."

Ignifer turned with a start. Honoria stood behind her, staring at her with such innocent eyes that Ignifer knew immediately she must have been there for a few minutes. Ignifer shook her head and tried to regain control of her face. "Why would you think so?" she asked, turning away again. "We go to battle tomorrow, and our leader has just told us that he does not expect everyone to survive. I would be happy if I were guaranteed to live, but there is no reason for joy in the face of this."

“Bollocks,” said Honoria cheerfully, and shut the door of Ignifer’s room. Ignifer couldn’t help glancing at it. Honoria shrugged when she caught the glance. “I know counters to most of the simple unlocking spells.”

“I am not surprised.”

Honoria laughed at her. “But you are happy, Ignifer,” she said, going over and stretching out on Ignifer’s four-poster, a bed so ugly that Ignifer was not surprised it had been relegated to the dusty “guest” quarters before she came to Hogwarts. “I can tell. And I even know why you’re happy.”

“Do enlighten me, then,” Ignifer said, turning to face the mirror she’d conjured earlier. She had to stare closely at her hair as she used spells to fix it in place on her neck. She didn’t want it getting in her face during the battle. “Since you know so much more about my own emotions than I do.”

“That’s what a lover should do,” said Honoria. She ignored the startled little jerk that Ignifer made. “And you’re happy because Harry came back. He’s been moping himself into a corner for the past few days, and you were wondering if we would get the chance to fight and die with honor. Now we will, because he woke up and realized that the rest of us were more important than the people who died for him. You aren’t frightened of dying tomorrow. You’re frightened of the way you might have died, if Harry was still grieving so much that he refused to lead or made some strange and incompetent plan. I don’t really understand this focus on honor that you have, but I suppose it has something to do with your Light past.”

That was actually remarkably accurate. Ignifer saw no reason why she should have given up all her honor when she Declared for the Dark. That was in and of itself the honorable thing to do, when the wild Dark had saved her life, though of course her father hadn’t seen it that way. But she wasn’t about to admit that Honoria had guessed right. She went on braiding her hair in silence.

“Now that we’ve talked about the emotions,” said Honoria, her face and voice very bright, “can we shag?”

Ignifer did choke this time, and spin around to stare at her. Honoria was sitting up, and she had a faint smile on her face, but the smile was serious enough to let Ignifer know that she would—shag her, if one had to use that vulgar word, in a moment if Ignifer accepted the invitation.

“No,” said Ignifer, who had the feeling it’d taken far too long for her to give a simple denial. Her voice sounded muffled. “Of course not.”

Honoria pouted and rolled back over on her side, accidentally-on-purpose letting her robes ride up to reveal a length of her thigh. “And why not?” she asked.

“There is every reason why not!” Ignifer spun around. Her face was burning. She tried desperately to recall the codes of behavior that her family had drilled into her about this when she was a young girl. There weren’t many of them, actually. When the time came that she should think about bearing children, then she would look for a suitable husband, pureblood and Declared to the Light, and hopefully the magical heir of his family, though the last wasn’t required. It would be enough of an honor for his children to bear the Apollonis name, after all. They would do everything by formalities that Ignifer had known all her life.

One thing those codes were clear about was that no one was supposed to pursue anyone else. That was for halfbloods and others who didn’t have the assurance of a marriage whether or not they loved.

Well, a halfblood woman is trying awfully hard to court me, Ignifer thought, slightly hysterical. And she’s also Declared for Dark. I suppose only the magical heirship is lacking.

“I don’t know why you’re doing this,” she told Honoria when she thought she had her breathing under control, catching her eye in the mirror. “If it’s only to be funny or tease me, you can leave. I will never joke back. I have no sense of humor.”

“Yes, you do,” said Honoria. “It’s a lover’s task to know that, too. And as for why I’m doing this, I told you already. You’re beautiful, and intelligent, and stubborn, and proud. I want you.”

Ignifer ducked her head, feeling her cheeks burn. Pureblood prudery, perhaps, but she just wasn’t used to hearing people talk like that.

“And as for why we should shag now,” Honoria continued, a bit of hope entering her voice, “you know the situation. There are history-songs that talk about it. The night before we leave for battle. Couples bed each other to assert the primacy of life in the face of death.”

“The history-songs I heard usually placed such—bedding after the battle,” Ignifer pointed out.

“Well, that’s stupid,” said Honoria. “Because how did the couples know they were still going to be alive then? We’re alive right now.” Her hand moved in the mirror, and Ignifer saw her patting the bed. “Come here, Ignifer. Don’t let some shadow of your father stop you.”

Ignifer closed her eyes for a long moment. She would be doing this for a stupid reason if she gave in, she thought. No matter what Honoria might say about asserting the primacy of life, it was mostly going to be a quick fumble, without dignity, without the rules that Ignifer had known all her life.

Well, ask her about that, then. See what she says.

Ignifer opened her eyes and turned to face Honoria. The younger woman was watching her intently, holding her breath. Ignifer frowned. I wish she would not do that. It’s as if she finds me too beautiful to resist, and I know that is nonsense.

“I might break the rules for you,” she told Honoria, “but it would be only a few moments of passion, and that would feel tawdry to me.”

Honoria gave a smile Ignifer hadn’t seen before, and rose to her feet. “A few moments?” she murmured. “That’s what you think. It’s six in the evening now, and we have until at least six tomorrow morning.”

Ignifer swallowed, her heart beating fast, as Honoria came towards her and took one of her hands, standing on tiptoe to whisper into her ear.

“We have hours,” Honoria whispered. “And I intend to use a few of them near dawn for sleeping, if that.” Her other hand slid coaxingly along Ignifer’s arm, and she drew back to smirk at her. “If you agree, of course,” she said, and repeated the sliding gesture, making Ignifer feel an inexplicable urge to squirm closer.

Ignifer shut her eyes for a few moments, and contemplated it. This obviously meant something to Honoria. It would not be quick. If they both survived the battle, it might be repeated.

And if this broke the rules she had known all her life—did that matter? Her father doubtless thought she had lain with every Dark pureblood already, because he believed that was what Dark witches and wizards did. Ignifer did not think Honoria would gossip about it. And if one of them died in the battle tomorrow, no one else would ever know.

“All right,” she whispered.

Honoria immediately seized her mouth in a kiss, as if afraid she would back out if she waited a moment longer. Ignifer bowed her head, and slowly, hesitantly, kissed back. A moment later, Honoria undid the charms on her hair so that it tumbled around them.

“Don’t need these right now,” Honoria whispered, curved an arm around her neck, and drew her back into the kiss.

“And then the witch went home, because she had a diamond necklace and a cup on a chain, and that was all she’d asked of the world,” Thomas finished. He gently set the book aside, stroking the cover. Really, the library at Hogwarts had the finest collection of old fey tales he’d ever seen, ridiculous legends that broke all the laws of magic. But he’d enjoyed reading them aloud via the communication spell to his children for the last few days.

“Father?”

Rose's voice, emerging from his left arm, pulled him back. Thomas looked towards the sound of her voice and imagined her seated in the library, just finished copying down the words he'd read. She was the one of his children most interested in preserving old knowledge, especially if it was new to her. "What is it, dear?"

"Do you think you'll die tomorrow?"

Thomas tilted his head back and regarded the ceiling with a frown. "Well, Rosie, I don't know," he murmured. "We're prepared, and we have a good plan. And I think that I know enough spells that the Death Eaters don't stand a chance of guessing them before I use them, especially when they're non-verbal. And I know that I trust Harry, and most of the people who'll go to battle with him trust him, too. The children in the school don't, or they wouldn't have tried to give him over to Voldemort yesterday, but they don't count as much. And—"

"Father!" Rose's voice was just slightly exasperated. "Do you think you'll die? That was the question I asked." Her words wavered on the end.

"I don't know," Thomas said, studying his wrist in interest now. "Have you been reading those books again that claim you can develop Divination ability without being born with it? You can't. That's one of the things we learned from the Grand Unified Theory. Divination is a useless subject to teach. There are some students who will just never be able to master it, and that means—"

"Father. No, I haven't been reading those books again. I know they're useless. But—you don't sound afraid. And we're all afraid that you'll die. Even Mother, though I know she doesn't show it." Rose's voice lowered on the last words, as if she thought Priscilla, or one of her siblings, might be listening to her.

Thomas smiled gently. He had no doubt that it was true, if Rose said it was so. She was his magical heir, and because of that, he'd treated her a bit more like an adult than the other children. And she'd reacted to the training well, seeing things that an adult would be more likely to notice most of the time.

"I would expect them to be afraid," he said, tilting his head to the side and rubbing at the back of his neck. "It's death, after all. And they're not here with me. And your mother's been overworked in the past few days, with the Ministry exploding as news of the situation at Hogwarts spreads throughout the wizarding world."

"But you're not," Rose whispered.

"No," said Thomas. "I'm not."

"Why not?"

Thomas shrugged and stood, meandering through the shelves of books to put away the one he'd borrowed to read to Rose. "I don't know. I never have been. Death is there, and it's going to happen someday, and I would prefer that it not be painful. But—it would be like being afraid of the sky. It's always there. It won't go away just because you want it to. And your life's easier when you don't ignore it."

"The sky doesn't kill you, though." Rose's voice sharpened in the way that Thomas knew meant she was getting angry with him. He was sorry for that. He never did know when he crossed the line from ordinary behavior into anger-making behavior.

But he didn't live in the same world as other people. He knew it when he tried to explain things that were simple to him, and they didn't understand. But he could get frustrated by that or he could get used to it, and he'd done the latter.

"But in other ways, it resembles death," he said. "And I think being afraid of either of them would be silly."

Rose said nothing for a moment, but the tingle of magic on Thomas's left wrist told him she hadn't ended the communication spell. He waited patiently, running his fingers along the shelf of books in front of him. He had to go to bed soon, to be ready and rested for the battle in the morning, but he wanted to choose some light reading to take with him.

"I love you, Father," Rose whispered. "I hope you don't die."

Thomas laughed gently as he pulled out a book on centaurs he hadn't seen before. It would interest him to read what implausibilities filled it. "I love you too, Rosie, and I hope the same thing. Good night."

"And take care of your mother."

"Well, of course take care of our mother," said Michael, giving him an offended look.

Charles really couldn't blame his son for doing that; it had been a stupid reminder to give the twins, that he wanted them to take care of Medusa if he died in the battle tomorrow. Some of the promises they had requested from him in return were more outlandish. For example, Owen had wanted Charles to create a guarding spell that would follow Harry around like one of the Muggle dogs that guided the blind. Michael had wanted Charles to adopt a child, one of their older cousins, if they were both gone. He didn't think his parents should be without children.

The house will feel so empty if they are both gone, Charles thought, watching his sons as they lounged back against the bed in his guest quarters. But that would be true even if only one of them died.

There was a pause in the conversation. None of them could really think of anything else to say, Charles supposed, or any other promises to make. They had pressed hands, and confessed fears, and asserted what would happen if one of them survived but the others didn't.

Charles wondered if Owen and Michael were afraid. Owen's face, in particular, was so calm that he could tell hardly anything from it.

He was not afraid.

He had known this day would come when he committed his family to Harry. In truth, this day had been coming for twenty-six years, since

Voldemort had returned to Britain. This was the first time that someone who was not Dumbledore would go forth in battle against the Dark Lord with the whole world able to watch.

Charles felt a fierce, quiet gladness that he was here, and able to participate in the battle. Since his nephew had died in a failed Death Eater raid, he had known Voldemort would not benefit the Rosier-Henlins. But Harry would, and he had survived his own first great moral crisis. When Charles asked what had driven him so deep into grief, Harry had talked to him in private and told him what had happened to the children in the Life-Web.

The first of many decisions like that, Charles thought. And he will not let it callus him.

Charles mourned for those children's parents, but he rejoiced that his own family followed a leader so strong and had found a place close to him. He reached out now and clasped first Owen's hand, then Michael's.

"To death in the morning—causing it, and not experiencing it," he said. It was the salute his father had given him the first time he fought.

Owen repeated it, and then Michael, their voices strong and shining. Charles nodded, and watched as they left.

Then he invoked the communication spell to speak to Medusa. It might be the last time he would ever do so.

But he was not afraid.

Pansy sat down on the top of the Astronomy Tower. It was high enough to be cold, even though summer was coming tomorrow, and the sight of the fires beneath her was intimidating enough to scare most people away from the walls. Even the wards seemed thinner up here.

That was, in fact, the point. No one was likely to bother her.

Pansy closed her eyes, and dropped straight into the cold darkness she'd learned to carry within her about three months ago. The world

around her sang like a cracked bell, but within the darkness, all the bells stopped. Pansy found herself in the midst of a deeper cold than she had known could exist. This was the darkness left when life had passed, she thought. Someone could stop speaking aloud, and still have the warmth that breathing and moving blood lent. She herself was a living example. And Lucius Malfoy, for all that he prided himself on his chillness, could not have endured a cold like this. Only the dead and the necromancers were meant to.

When she looked up into the darkness, she saw holes in the place of stars. They were always there, patiently waiting, sometimes gently tugging on the dead. Most of the dead who did not become ghosts but remained close enough to the living world to communicate with necromancers went up those holes in the end. Pansy did not know what lay beyond them, because no one ever returned to talk or tell.

“Hullo, Pansy.”

She turned and nodded to the most talkative spirit she knew, who foamed towards her like mist. He created a face for a moment, then let that go and took the form of a great dog instead. He claimed to find it more natural. Pansy wondered if it was because a human body was more complicated, or if it had to do with the fact that his animal form so closely resembled a death-connected Grim.

“Hullo, Sirius.” She could speak aloud here, because this was not the mortal world. She sat down and watched him for a moment as he snapped at drifting bits of his own misty body. “Looking forward to tomorrow?”

Sirius Black turned his head and stared at her for a moment. His eyes held the mad, haunted look that Pansy had grown used to when he “taught” at the school in her second and third years. Most of the time, he looked like what Pansy supposed was his younger self, rather madcap. She knew why he had changed.

“Hush,” she said quietly, and reached out a hand to stroke the cold mist on the top of his head. “Tomorrow will be hard, but I knew that when I first gained the ability to see death. There will be people who perish tomorrow. But there are people who perish everywhere, every

day. And since I'll be on the battlefield, you'll have the ability to come forth and help Harry."

The haunted look in Sirius's eyes eased a bit, and he licked playfully at her fingers. "That's true," he said. "But I'm still not looking forward to tomorrow."

Pansy nodded. "I know." Sirius would be able to appear only in the form of a ghostly dog. He couldn't actually rejoin the world of the living, and even if Harry saw him, which was doubtful, Pansy didn't know if he would be able to speak to him. They were part of such different worlds now. Sometimes she caught Sirius looking up at the black holes in the darkness. It had been nearly two years since he died, and other than his own guilt and remorse at the manner of his death and a wish to help make up for it, Sirius had no tie of love or vengeance to hold him here, the way most spirits did. Pansy was frankly surprised he had resisted for so long. She wondered if she would have come back in a few days, battle or no battle, and found him gone.

"I miss him," Sirius said then, which was part of their nightly rituals.

"I know," said Pansy.

"I wish I could do something more to help," said Sirius, and wagged his tail, and looked frustrated. Pansy knew what she had to do. As she progressed further in her necromancer studies, she had learned that part of her task was to help ease the dead's powerful emotions. The living had the living to do it for them, but the dead had no one if the only people able to speak to them wouldn't help.

"You can't," she said gently. "You're dead."

Sirius no longer snarled at her when she said that, the way he had when she was first able to see him. He lowered his head and put it on his paws instead, and gave a pitiful whine.

"Harry misses you," Pansy whispered, stroking his fur. "And you miss him. But you can't be part of the same world anymore. The divide is too deep. And after tomorrow—well, I don't know, Sirius. Do you think

you'll be able to stay here much longer? I expect to find you gone each time I come looking for you."

"I don't know," said Sirius, and rolled over so his head was against her knee. "I still wish I'd told him. There were so many things I could have done differently, and then I might have been there, and helped him when Lily and James turned on him."

"It's over and done," said Pansy firmly. "It was inevitable. You died there because you were meant to die there. If my father had seen you alive, he would have known."

"I suppose destiny is true," Sirius grumbled back, "but it does bugger all for comfort."

Pansy laughed quietly and ruffled his fur again. "Your brother is getting help now," she said. "He broke his own silence that might have cost him everything. And Harry will win this battle. We'll help him win."

Sirius sighed and closed his eyes. "I know," he whispered.

"You'll be at peace in the end."

"I know."

Pansy said nothing else. They had discussed the ins and outs of the battle as much as possible, and Sirius knew everything about it as it related to him and Pansy. They could do no more but sit in the cold and darkness, and share silence.

"You realize that someone could see us outlined against the castle and fling a curse at us," Draco said softly, nuzzling his face into the back of Harry's neck.

Harry snorted, and said, "That would be why I have a concealing charm up, Draco, so that the Death Eaters don't take the chance to reduce us to small smears of black goo on the wall."

“Oh,” said Draco, and then peered over Harry’s shoulder at the campfires again.

They were up in the North Tower, because Harry had wanted to go there before he went to sleep. Draco had agreed, particularly when he found out that they could be alone there. He hadn’t been alone with Harry all day; first had come Snape’s shredding of Harry’s guilt complex in his quarters, and then had come endless strategy meetings, sometimes with all of his allies, sometimes with just one. Draco had kept himself busy enough, speaking with his parents via the communication spell and practicing his possession abilities, slipping through the minds of the Slytherins. He was relieved to find that most of them were shocked at Blaise’s treachery, and even angry. Draco knew the feeling. He was going to find Blaise when the siege was done.

But now they were alone, and standing on the North Tower, and gazing out at the camp of their enemies. Well, Draco supposed, one couldn’t have everything.

“Thank you,” Harry said.

Draco stiffened slightly in surprise. “For what?” he asked.

“For not pressing me today,” Harry said, turning around and holding his eyes. “For not insisting that I talk to you when I wasn’t ready. And for not wailing and blaming yourself for falling victim to Blaise’s trick. It happened to all of us.”

“I would only wail if he was beyond my reach,” said Draco calmly. “As it is, he’ll pay.”

Harry regarded him sternly.

“He will,” said Draco. “Him, and Findarin, and Tipperary, and Belville, and the two Death Eaters McGonagall captured. They all will, Harry.”

“I think we should let the Ministry try them—“

"The Ministry won't consider what they did a crime," Draco interrupted. "Well, the adults maybe, but not three harmless students." He made his voice into a vicious parody of what Harry had told him the Department of Magical Family and Child Services woman, Madam Shiverwood, sounded like. "So they'll definitely leave them alone. And that's not right, Harry. You have to show that you won't let your enemies get away with something like that. If that means setting your allies on them, fine. But you can't leave them just dangling around unpunished. They were idiots."

"They were frightened," Harry corrected quietly.

"So were the rest of us!" Draco exclaimed. "But you don't see the rest of us doing something that mad, do you?"

Harry's body was tense in his arms for a moment. Then he sighed out, and leaned against Draco. "All right," he murmured. "If you can get McGonagall and Snape to agree, then I won't interfere."

Draco waited for some contradiction, some protest, some explanation of morality. But Harry said nothing, just looked at the fires.

"And that's it?" Draco asked, his voice growing edged in spite of himself. "That's all the objections you'll make?"

"I'm tired, Draco."

Draco resisted the temptation to snap that they all were, and waited. Harry was letting his weight be supported as much by the stones in front of him as he was by the arms around him, he thought.

"I'm tired," Harry continued. "And I can't afford to be, not if we're going to win this war. I always intended to send Voldemort howling so that I could take some time to heal myself and make the future progress of the war a surer thing. Now it's even more urgent. I frightened myself with how far I fell until Snape rescued me. And I'm not entirely sure, even now, that I made the right choice, and if I confront the parents of those dead children like this, I'd break."

“But you aren’t going to tell them that you killed their children,” said Draco, slightly incredulous.

Harry turned and looked at him, eyes calm and luminous. “Of course I am. They deserve to know what happened.” He shook his head when Draco opened his mouth to argue. “No. I’ll face them, and deal with what I have to deal with. But I’m going to put it off until I can actually deal with it, and that won’t be until after I visit the Sanctuary.”

“I thought that was a fever dream of yours,” Draco murmured, burying his face against Harry’s neck again.

“No,” said Harry. “I’m tired, Draco, of lots of things. I’m tired of drowning in guilt that other people would overcome easily. I’m tired of extending too much forgiveness and only knowing it when someone else points it out. I’m tired of not being able to relate to you physically, and then dismissing my own attempts to overcome that, because there’s always something more important going on.” His hand found Draco’s own and squeezed it. “This is the point, after the battle, where more important things end for a while. I’m going to the Sanctuary, and working on my own healing, so that eventually I can work towards the healing of the world with a surer heart.”

Draco swallowed, decided he would choke if he tried to say anything, and settled for turning Harry and kissing him. He was not sure what affected him more: the revelation that Harry was finally, finally taking some time for himself, or the revelation that Harry was talking about his own life after the battle as something he would have, and not have to give up to Voldemort in payment for having killed those children.

Harry kissed back, firmly, and then smiled as he pulled away. “Would you like to come to the Sanctuary with me?” he asked.

“I would have followed you if you left me behind,” said Draco, and wrapped an arm firmly around him. “No letting someone else teach you what pleasure is like.”

Harry laughed, high above the battlefield, on the edge of death, and Draco had to close his eyes.

Chapter Ninety: Beneath This Storm of Light

The dawn came, and with it, the storm.

Harry met it standing on the edge of the Astronomy Tower, watching the east as it shone with gentle colors at first, orange and peach and apricot. Then those hues melted into each other, and grew fiercer and fiercer, and surged, and turned the color of gold and diamonds. The image of a gryphon hung in the sky, hovering with wings spread over Hogwarts, blazing with all the colors of fire.

Harry could hear frightened shouts from the Death Eaters behind and below him. He allowed himself a tiny smile. Did Voldemort tell them that they would be fighting beneath the Light itself today? Or did he consider that a tiny, pesky little detail that they didn't need to know about?

The gryphon's wings faded into white where they met the clouds, but the center of its body was real, defined, sharp, and full of gold. Its talons, blue, were held tucked close to its chest. Its eyes were rubies made of light, and its neck and head blared orange. Harry wondered if the talons or the wickedly curved beak were causing the Death Eaters more problems. Or perhaps it was the lion-like hind paws, though as yet they were still fighting to form out of the sunrise.

Harry lifted his left wrist, both to salute the Light and in a private memorial of his own. A year ago today, he had lost that hand.

The gryphon abruptly began to flap its wings. Harry stared, and heard the wild song of the Light in his ears, played by the turning of the sun and the moon and the stars, very close. The song melted into an echoing cry that streamed out of the gryphon's beak. Harry felt the sound uplifting him.

From behind and beneath him, the Death Eaters didn't find it nearly so inspiring. And why would they? Harry wondered, looking over his shoulder and watching their stumbling panic with a faint smirk. This was the Light screaming its defiance at the Dark and its Lord. They would know that its greeting or its blessing or both was not meant for them.

Harry turned back in time to see the gold at the center of the gryphon's body growing brighter, until he had to put his hand over his eyes. Then the image broke with a crack like thunder, and the air flooded with more music and with light cleaner and purer and richer than ordinary sunshine. Harry was not surprised, when he felt able to look up again, to see that the center of the sky was aswarm with glittering, tumbling golden waves, all of them edged with white like the gryphon's wings, all of them moving in a lazy circle that centered on Hogwarts.

The storm of Light had arrived.

Harry turned to face the Death Eaters and the battlefield again. Voldemort was moving through their ranks, heading to the front of the crowd for his morning announcement about what would happen to the inhabitants of Hogwarts if they didn't hand Harry over. Harry kept his gaze fixed on him, and hoped McGonagall was watching for his signal.

"Today is Midsummer," Voldemort called out, his voice, accented with Sonorus, striving for dignity and failing. "The thirteen days of grace that I gave you have passed. Now that the storm—"

Harry called his phoenix fire, finding no trouble in summoning righteous anger with Voldemort right below him. It flared, blue and white, and Voldemort's snake swung its head to look at him. Harry was almost sure he saw the Dark Lord's lipless mouth part in a smile, though of course he was too high up—as Draco would have reminded him—to make out such details.

Harry called the phoenix fire to leap higher and higher, and then sent it up around him in a dazzling display of light. By now, all the Death Eaters were watching him, and so was Voldemort, amused and attracted by the reckless spending of such magic.

Harry had counted on that. While they focused on him, McGonagall quietly dropped the wards in one specific place, and the Weasley twins would be making their way out through the hole under one of Honoria's illusions. They were carrying the vials of potion that would

make those it touched go blind, and they were heading for the Quidditch Pitch, where their brooms were stored. McGonagall closed the wards again the moment they were through. Harry waited until he felt them tighten before he spoke.

“Here I am, Tom,” he said, and saw Voldemort make a checked movement that bespoke his fury. Harry smiled more widely. He does hate being called by his name. “What do you think? Should we settle this with a duel once and for all, like Lords and gentlemen?”

“I think not, Harry.” Voldemort’s voice had gone back to the disgusting croon it had been when he captured the children in the Life-Web. “You should have known better than to challenge me. When you succumb to my power, and lie broken and bleeding at my feet, looking up at me, you will learn better. I will personally take charge of your reeducation myself.”

And on he went, blathering, while another tiny hole in the wards opened up in front of Harry. He knelt down, scooped up a handful of what would look like tiny golden pellets from the stone in front of him, and dropped them over the edge of the Tower.

The Gloryflower insects fell until they hit stone or soil, and if they hit stone, scurried madly across it until they could reach the soil. Harry hadn’t had a chance to spread them through Hogwarts’s grounds before Indigena arrived. They were going now, though, with the specific imperative to bite every plant that wasn’t grass or a tree. That would doubtless mean the loss of some native flowers and Hagrid’s vegetable garden, but it would get rid of Indigena’s vines and blossoms and thorns. Harry didn’t dare send out the Gloryflower horses, among others, until he knew Indigena wouldn’t be able to just grab them with vines and hold them motionless.

“What are you doing?” Voldemort demanded abruptly. His snake was apparently looking in the right direction to have noticed the insects, though not the hole in the wards.

Harry arched a brow and smiled as he scattered another handful of insects downwards. “What does it look like I’m doing, Tom?”

Another twitch from the Dark Lord. "It looks as if you think that you need help in defeating me," he sneered.

"I would say that," Harry agreed, and then lifted his eyes to scan the five hundred or so Death Eaters behind Voldemort. "But you hardly came prepared for single combat either, Tom. Giants. Really. Was that necessary?"

By now, Voldemort was shaking with anger. Harry dropped two more handfuls of insects before he was able to respond.

"They shall all die," Voldemort whispered. "They shall all perish, and I shall make you kill some of them yourself, as you did by the lake."

Harry kept himself from staggering with an effort. Voldemort's Sonorus was touching the ears of everyone in the castle, if he kept the form of the spell he had used for his morning announcements. That meant that everyone would now know he had killed those children in the Life-Web.

He pushed it aside. He would deal with it later, and hope that no one would try to stab him in the back from within the school because of it. He looked outward again, scanning the distance, the road that led to Hogsmeade.

"What are you looking for, Harry?" Voldemort called. "Aurors from the Ministry come to save you?"

"No," said Harry, softly enough that he didn't think Voldemort could hear him. His eyes locked on a glint of light that wasn't the storm reflecting off something. "A second sunrise."

A moment later, horns, or the sound of horns, broke the morning, sounding like the hunting horn that Harry had heard summoning him throughout Walpurgis. He felt his face break into a smile in answer, especially when one of Honoria's illusions answered with trumpets from within the school. Some of the Death Eaters looked uneasily over their shoulders.

“What was that?” Voldemort demanded.

Harry couldn't believe he wanted an answer to that question. But he didn't have to give it, because it answered itself in the next few moments.

Gloryflower had arrived.

The ground shook with vibrations as a herd of artificial unicorns came charging, their bodies glinting silver as running water beneath the golden sky, their diamond horns sharp and lowered and playing that hunting call over and over, their hooves flashing and their manes streaming. They bound straight past the still-staring giants and slammed into the back of the Death Eaters. Harry saw more than one body go flying, stabbed by a horn through the guts or kicked by one of the hooves that Laura had told him were as sharp as knives.

Vines lashed out of the ground, grabbing and slowing some of the unicorns, but these were not the horses Laura had sent. They had no riders to take care of, and plenty of edges. The unicorns whipped up and down, and the vines fell cut and wriggling from their feet and their bodies. Harry saw spikes springing out of their necks and flanks, severing their assailants and then withdrawing beneath the silver again so that the unicorns could pick up speed.

At the same moment, some of the Death Eaters began to scream. Harry concentrated, sharpening his ears with his magic, and made out some of their words. They were blind. Fred and George had reached their brooms, and were on them above the field, scattering down drops of their potion.

Harry looked down at Voldemort, and saw the fury gathering on his face. His magic was gathering around him, too, a Dark answer to the Light overhead, and Harry could feel it opening like a pit with snakes at the bottom.

He stepped back from the edge of the Astronomy Tower, dropped the phoenix fire, and reached out his hand. The artificial animal curled up beneath the wall, so that Voldemort wouldn't see it before it was time,

raised its head and blinked at him, then bowed its back so that Harry could climb aboard.

This was the creature that Laura had said her ancestor had built a prototype of. She'd sent the prototype and one other copy of the creature to Harry. Harry thought it had started out something like a thestral, but Laura's ancestor had gone slightly mad in adding spikes and horns and fins, until it looked more like a cross between a thestral and a dragon, and perhaps a unicorn if one took into account the enormous single horn rising from its forehead. It was made of iron, and ugly beyond belief, but its sides had ready-made stirrups. In spite of his lack of experience riding horses, Harry could ride this and know he wouldn't be thrown off.

He fixed his feet into the stirrups and leaned forward. The iron creature spread its wings. Harry felt the egg-shaped stone bouncing in his robe pocket, along with several other stones pried from the walls of Hogwarts. The egg-shaped stone was full of the purified magic he'd taken from Dumbledore and Voldemort, and finished cleansing last night with Peter and Draco and Snape to watch over him.

The other stones were empty.

Right now, anyway.

The iron creature took several running steps, and then launched itself from the edge of the Tower. Harry clutched the spiny neck; his Quidditch gear, especially the glove, was essential to protecting him while he rode the beast. They circled out over the battlefield, tents and fires and Death Eaters swinging crazily beneath the madly flapping blue-black wings.

Harry used one knee to nudge the iron creature upward, and it took the command, rising. Harry streamed across the grounds towards the Forbidden Forest, looking all the while for some sign that not just the Gloryflower unicorns were there.

He saw it in the form of three separate triangular flashes of light, their agreed-upon signal, and pumped his arm. The Gloryflowers, the

Griffinsnests, the elder Malfoys, and the others waiting on the edge of the grounds began to move forward. They'd arrived without being noticed; the Death Eaters hadn't been worried about a threat from behind.

Harry wheeled the iron beast around again. He could see threats from at least two directions. The first was that the giants had begun to move, swinging their clubs onto their shoulders with stern grunts and heading for Hogwarts. They wouldn't care about wading into the panicking Death Eaters, Harry knew.

The second was that Voldemort was attacking Hogwarts's wards.

Harry took a deep breath and opened his absorbere ability as widely as it would go. Then he began to rake the Death Eaters gathered around the Quidditch Pitch and the edges of the Forbidden Forest, swallowing their magic with no care for if it was fouled or not. He needed as much power as he could get his hand on, and it wouldn't matter if he gulped enough to burst him, because he would pass most of it directly into the stones in his pocket.

Voldemort swung to face him at once. He pointed one hand, and a spell Harry didn't know traveled up through the air towards him in a deadly dark cone.

Harry spun the iron beast to meet it, and it obeyed him as quickly and neatly as the Firebolt would have. This was his major part in the battle, other than gathering magic. He would face Voldemort and hold him, because no one else could do that.

He broke the dark cone, turning it aside, deflecting it into small scattered particles that fell and burned themselves out harmlessly long before they hit the grass. Harry gave Voldemort a smile he was certain to feel and then began gulping more magic. Voldemort, he thought, would have to come and face him. He wouldn't want to drain his own followers of power, and to break through the wards and drain those inside Hogwarts would take moments of effort in which Harry would have a chance to become more and more powerful.

Sure enough, Voldemort, maddened by the thought of losing to him, did not leave him alone. He gave a command in Parseltongue that sounded choked in dirt, the same language he had used to control the worm in the graveyard, and several Death Eaters flew aside as something slithered over to him from the direction of his tent.

Harry fought to hold onto his breakfast. The creature was a flesh-dragon, made of stitched-together parts of Muggle bodies, the same one he had seen in some of his visions when he'd still held the Occlumency link to Voldemort open. It breathed not fire, but a great and vicious stink, if he remembered correctly.

And now Voldemort was mounting its back, accompanied by his snake, and pointing Harry out, still shouting in choked Parseltongue. Harry saw the dragon's head, slick and pale and sewn together, lift and orient on him. The great wings flashed and flapped, and the dragon began to rise from the ground.

Harry braced himself for the meeting, glad he rode a non-living mount that couldn't be affected by the stink, and hoped that his attacking allies were in a position to do something about the giants.

Lucius ducked, his hair flying, as one of the giants' clubs tried to smash him into the ground. Narcissa dropped smoothly to her knees behind him, grabbing his shoulder and shielding him with a Protego as one of the giant spears stabbed at him. The giant recoiled. Lucius knew maintaining the Shield Charm had cost his wife, but she didn't appear to be tired as she held out her hand and helped him rise.

"On three?" she asked.

Lucius nodded, and put his back to hers. They were aiming at giants who appeared to be ignoring them now for the sake of getting to Hogwarts, or had perhaps simply forgotten about the smaller creatures when they looked away. Giants had notoriously short attention spans, which was one of the difficulties with getting them to be allies in wizard wars.

"One," he said.

“Two,” Narcissa echoed him.

“Three,” they said together, and followed the number with the curse that alone could carry all their rage and hatred when their son was cooped up in a school and threatened by the madman Lucius used to serve.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Twin beams of green light shot away from their wands, and each felled a giant. Lucius laughed aloud, cold, fierce pleasure rising up in him. He heard Narcissa laughing with the same emotion behind him. He never felt so close to her as he did in these moments. He turned and claimed a hungry kiss, in the instant before she had to cast a Shield Charm around him to protect him from a giant’s flying club.

In fact, Lucius saw as he looked up, the giants seemed to be going mad, acting as if something invisible were circling their heads and taunting them. Were there giant-gnats?

“Takes a more concentrated—” Fred shouted as he emptied one of their vials of blinding potion on a giant’s head.

“Dose to bring them down,” George finished, nodding as he emptied two vials on the same giant, flying his broom with his knees, and then reached into his robe pocket for another. “Yes, it does.”

Fred grinned at him, and George grinned back, thinking that this was really the perfect way to test their new products. Protected by their illusion, no one could see them to hit at them, and that meant they only had to dodge randomly fired curses and, now that they were among the giants, wildly swinging clubs. And since they had both been Beaters on the Gryffindor Quidditch team for the majority of their school careers, that was no trouble.

“Bet I can get that one,” Fred said then, nodding to one giant in the center of the tangle, which was staring at its blind, flailing brothers in dumb wonder.

“Not before me!” George shouted, and urged his broom forward. Fred laughed and rose over the giants’ heads. George, meanwhile, took the lower route, around and through the giants’ arms and weapons.

A club passed close enough to cause a whiffle of wind to run up his ribs. George shivered and put on a burst of speed to carry him clear. He nearly hit a second giant in the armpit, but spun the broom twice, in a maneuver that Connor had shown him, and ducked around the obstruction. He had to keep one hand on the vials in his pocket so they didn’t fall or fly out, and he had to watch all the time just in case he missed a shadow that would indicate a weapon was coming at him, and he was blasted again and again with the foul smell of sweating giants in close quarters.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been this madly happy.

He came out under his last raised arm, and saw the giant he and Fred had targeted immediately ahead. He also saw that Fred was going to reach him first; his route had been faster after all. George cursed and pulled up, hovering, ready to listen to whatever taunts Fred gave him in good humor.

Fred turned and glanced back, seeing him. A smile lit his face, and he drew breath to shout something.

Their target had had his head lifted. Now, for the first time, George saw his nose working. Then he grunted, and swung his club around in a steady circle.

Fred never saw it coming.

The club caught his broomstick and smashed it to kindling. Then it broke his legs—George could hear those snaps of bones as if they were his own—and traveled on, straight into his ribs. George shrieked, on fire with his twin’s pain, sharing the sensations as he never had before.

He was diving without conscious thought, falling and falling, his eyes locked on Fred’s motionless, falling form. He felt himself draw his wand and chant the Levitation Charm without realizing he would do it,

either. With Fred unconscious—hopefully unconscious, at least—he felt only half-alive.

He saw Fred slow. And then he caught him, he caught him, oh he had him, wrapped close in his arms, held tightly, and he could feel Fred's ribs twitching and folding inward in a way that no ribs ever should, and Fred choked on blood and met his eyes.

"Don't you dare die, you son of a bitch," George breathed, as he spun his broom and rose, flying directly towards the castle. He would get through the wards, he would burst through them if he had to, and if they went in through the Owlery, they would get to the hospital wing that much faster.

"No call to go insulting Mum," said Fred faintly, and shut his eyes.

George dismissed the glamour that would keep anyone from seeing them and realizing they needed help, and flew.

Harry cursed softly as Voldemort forced him to wheel high enough, and bring up enough defenses, that he could no longer easily reach and drain the Death Eaters. Voldemort was laughing at him, and his laughter sounded just as unpleasant aloud as it ever had in Harry's dreams.

"What good is magic if you do not use it?" he said now, and another spell that Harry didn't recognize came at him, this one a purple stream of light that forked again and again as he looked at it, like intelligent lightning bolts splitting to attack a target.

Harry swallowed that magic, too, and saw Voldemort's face twist. They were high enough now that Harry was shivering, and the lazy swirls of golden light turning overhead seemed closer than the people struggling on the ground.

Voldemort said something else, but Harry didn't really hear it. He was struggling with the flow of power he'd swallowed. He'd pressed most of it into the stones, but he had to retain some of it in case Voldemort hit him with a spell that couldn't be shielded against and was too vile to gulp down. And already he felt distant and detached from the world,

floating above it in a way that had nothing to do with his mount. He could do almost anything with this much magic. Why shouldn't he do it?

If he feels like this most of the time, Harry thought, eyes lingering on Voldemort as he spun the iron beast away from another bolt of forked lightning, this time green, it's no wonder that he thinks other people are of no account.

Voldemort touched the neck of his flesh dragon, and it drew its head back. Harry saw the slick jaws part, and he sucked in a quick, deep breath of air.

The dragon breathed, a clinging, choking cloud of inky murk that flowed around Harry's face. He could feel the oiliness of it against his skin even before he was forced to open his mouth to take in new air and smelled the reek. He began to hack. The smell was burning the lining of his throat and mouth, and the only solution he could think of to keep from vomiting his guts out was to aim the horned thestral for the sky and hope that it would bring him clear of the cloud soon.

It appeared to have worked; Harry could see light and golden sky a moment later, and he breathed clean air frantically to ease the burning. But his mount shook a moment later, and Harry realized that the flesh-dragon hovered not far away. Its tail had just slammed the thestral, and barely missed breaking his own leg. Now its head was coming around again, the jaws parting.

Harry dropped into the instincts that he usually kept for Quidditch, and willed the beast to dive. It obeyed him, dropping like a stone for long enough that Harry knew people would have been yelling his name in fear and fury from the stands if this was a true game. Then he kicked out, and the thestral turned and began to climb again in steady circles.

Harry turned his head, scanning for Voldemort, and saw the dragon bearing down on the battlefield. The Dark Lord had either got bored with him, or realized the best way to infuriate and incapacitate Harry was actually by attacking his allies.

I'm not going to let him do that.

Harry opened a conduit directly to Voldemort's magic, as he had done in the Chamber of Secrets, and last Midsummer in the graveyard, and began to drain him. The foul taste was enough to make him vomit this time, but he succeeded in getting Voldemort's attention. The dragon swung around again, a strange whistling shriek bursting from its throat.

"You dare?" Voldemort breathed, staring blindly down at him.

Harry thought that was fairly obvious, and tugged furiously at the siphon. He threw up again, but Voldemort was losing strength.

And now he had the Dark Lord's attention fully fixed on him.

Harry prepared to do some fast flying.

Ignifer shifted anxiously as she waited for Hogwarts's wards to part enough to let her and the other fighters out. McGonagall had been reluctant to agree at first, since they didn't know if Yaxley's plants were gone or remained to restrict their free movement, but Ignifer had pointed out that her fire could burn most vines and flowers, even magical ones, away. And since the Weasley twins had come back to the castle wounded, and Harry's allies on the far end of the field were tangling with Death Eaters now, someone had to do something about the giant problem.

Honorina stood close at her side, now and then giving her smiles as if to remind her of what they'd done last night. Ignifer avoided her glances, but only some of the time.

At her back were Harry's other adult allies and some of the older students. Minerva had also been extremely reluctant to let them risk their lives, but they could make a difference on the battlefield. Scattered though the Death Eaters were, distracted though their Lord was, some of them might make a concentrated effort on the wards, and then they would be fighting to protect the lives of defenseless students. And there simply weren't enough fighters on the field if they sent only the adults.

Ignifer leaned forward now, staring intently, watching for the moment when the blurred vision of the Hogwarts grounds, courtesy of the wards, gave way—

And then it did. She could see the flagstones of the courtyard just beyond the entrance hall, and the grass beyond that, and the struggling shapes, without looking through a veil of mist.

She led the way out, fire flaring around her, Honoria still keeping her place close beside her. Ignifer wasn't surprised to see glamours of other fighters take shape, replicating them at first, but appearing different enough the further away they stretched to make the Death Eaters think they were fighting many more enemies than were actually present. Honoria shrugged and smiled when she saw that Ignifer was watching her.

"The more we can keep them from striking at us, the better," she said. "These will even bleed and scream like the real thing."

Ignifer stopped herself from saying that Honoria was brilliant, because that would sound too sentimental. Besides, the next moment Honoria was sprouting feathers and hurtling aloft, looking for the place where she could use her illusions to best effect. Ignifer was sure she heard her cackle before she vanished into the storm of gold hovering over the castle.

A giant, brushing off the remains of what looked like a curse that had tried to tie it with ropes, stumbled towards her. Ignifer held out her wand. Though she could not call on the Light for help as she knew some of the wizards and witches today would do, her old sympathy with fire, which normally only the Light-Declared had so strongly, had never left her.

"Ardesco!" she cried.

Flames burst through the giant's gray skin, and it began to slap at itself inefficiently, trying to put the fire out. Ignifer laughed, and ran forward, calling out the incantation for the Flame Whip. It formed in her fist, and she lashed, curling it around the giant's leg and pulling. It

tottered, but remained standing upright, even as it howled in pain. Ignifer wasn't surprised. Giants could take a lot of damage before they fell. She supposed she could have slain it in a moment with the Killing Curse, but she preferred not to use the Unforgivables, and she definitely didn't want to take the chance that her curse would fly awry in such close quarters with her allies.

She laughed again, but that was cut short when the ground in front of her wrenched itself apart and vines exploded out, coiling around her legs and binding her wand arm to her side. Ignifer was a prisoner in moments, and had to stand still as the giant she'd burned hefted its club and stepped towards her.

Pansy knew she didn't have much time. So, the moment they stepped through the gate and she felt the rhythm of the battle reach out for her, she retreated into cold and darkness instead, reaching for the connection to Sirius.

He was there, a misty white dog, dancing around her like a mortal puppy. Pansy smiled faintly and ran her hand through the fur on his head.

"Ready?" she asked.

Sirius barked in answer, and Pansy began to open a gate from this quiet, dark world, this inner space, to the outer regions of light and life. It was harder than she'd been prepared for; death itself pressed against her, trying to keep them separate. Pansy had to stand still for a moment and let it see that she was one of its servants. She would not open the gates for any perverted reason, the way that the Dark Lord might, seeking a way to live forever. She knew everyone died eventually. She let the cold strike directly to the center of her mind, and share the visions she had seen, and see how she had kept her vows not to tell anyone.

Death was satisfied that she had kept the sacrifices and the vows. It rolled aside, and Sirius streamed into the world with a howl more nearly akin to a scream. Pansy knew that no one save those on the edge of death would be able to see him, but he would pull their wounded enemies into the darkness all the more quickly, and he

would inspire and gift their side with strength from an unknown source as he passed by. Sirius had been a Light-Declared wizard in life, after all, one of the reasons he had so irritated his parents, and today was the day of longest Light.

Pansy opened her eyes and found herself kneeling on the grass, shaking. Her mother stood over her, stroking her shoulder and blocking a curse with a Shield Charm.

Pansy? Her hands asked the question with considerable concern.

I'm well, Pansy answered, and that satisfied Hawthorn. She even smiled for a moment, and Pansy saw Sirius bound past her and hit a group of Death Eaters staggering with the impact of curses from the elder Malfoys. They screamed. Hawthorn laughed, and lifted her wand to deal with the giants.

Pansy closed her eyes. There were two more things she had to do. One required an enormous test of her necromancer powers. The other required nothing but courage and the acceptance of the inevitable.

She raised her hands and called in a voice inaudible to everyone save those who had passed, "Dead in service of an ignoble cause! I respect you, I recognize you, I know your sacrifices and would honor them! As we pass and meet on the road, I going in one direction and you in the other, I would send you to take revenge on the one who condemned you to death! Will you hear and heed me?"

The call echoed and reechoed in a world of loneliness and darkness that lay just behind the living world, the stopping place of the newly dead. Pansy's task was to get her voice to that point. She could not control who would answer, or how they might respond. That was not up to her. A necromancer spoke to, and for, the dead. She did not compel them.

She felt a cold sigh flow past her, and then a few voices answered, followed by more, until she had a chorus of perhaps a score moaning around her. Pansy stepped back, away, sideways—English had no good words for such a direction—and showed them the gate she'd

opened back to the living world for Sirius. Frost struck her side as they, too, took it.

Sirius had had to go back as a spirit because of the long time that had passed between his death and his return, and because he had no body; his had been burned in the Black funeral rites. But these dead were the fallen Death Eaters, and they had bodies to possess again.

Pansy could hear the screaming begin even as she opened her eyes. The newly reanimated dead were taking revenge on those responsible for their deaths, as they saw it—Voldemort's other soldiers, who had brought them here in the first place. The one who respected and spoke to them was on the opposite side. That further justified taking revenge on their former comrades. Pansy could hear panicky voices screaming curses that would have no effect. The dead had set minds that did not succumb to intimidation or any form of compulsion. The Death Eaters would have to destroy their bodies to make them stop coming.

Pansy laughed at the thought, finding it more than a little ironic that Death Eaters were so afraid of death. What happened to possessing the force that ends life, and insuring your own immortality? she thought, giddy. Is it too much to see the real thing walking?

She had not realized how much easier calling up the dead would make her last task. She was in their company now, and she felt them reaching out to her, stroking her with cold hands, claiming her as their kin. They knew she was one of them, and Pansy knew she was one of them, and the living world was falling away about her.

She knew what she had to do.

She turned her head, and there she was, a witch with blonde-brown hair and dark eyes and the shadow of leaves beneath her skin, riding an enormous vine that had just burst the soil and was growing upward like a tree. She had lost some of her plants to the golden Gloryflower insects inhabiting the soil, but not enough. Pansy knew she would continue to make trouble until she was driven from the battlefield.

And there was only one way to do that.

With a sense of inevitability, with a sense of the grace of fate, with a sense of turning cycles and turning wheels, Pansy faced Indigena Yaxley and called again. This time, what came down the road that Sirius had taken into the sunlit world was nothing so simple as a spirit. It was the force of cold itself, the force of death, and it struck Indigena's vine with the impact of a whole winter. Pansy saw the leaves wilt and curl, the smooth green body develop brown spots, the strength leave the vine like running sap or running blood.

Indigena's head swung at once, focusing on her, the leaves beneath her skin shifting and bunching. Pansy spread the cold wind wider, acting as a conduit now, attacking the vines that held her comrades still and helpless before the onslaught of the giants.

Her head throbbed with cold and the foreknowledge of death and a very great joy.

Her hands lifted and began to move in the final patterns.
"Avada Kedavra!"

Hawthorn watched in satisfaction as the giant threatening Apollonis fell, and then turned, by habit, to see what her daughter was doing, even though she knew Pansy possessed weapons that no one else on the battlefield did.

She was in time to see a pair of green-black tendrils lift Pansy high and turn her around. Hawthorn caught a glimpse of her daughter's hands, dancing out a familiar set of signs.

Hawthorn's heart withered. She recognized the signs not because she knew the language itself, but because she knew what every necromancer said right when he or she met the moment of death.

Do not mourn me. This is my fate. Thus I die.

Hawthorn was not sure whether it was one kind of inevitability, the knowledge of disaster, or the second, the disaster that said she would be too late anyway, that held her to the spot as the tendrils wrenched Pansy apart, and she saw her daughter die. The blood came thick and fast, a spatter of gore as her arms were tugged from her body that told Hawthorn she would have needed magical healing in the first few moments to survive. And those moments were past, and then another tendril closed around Pansy's head and pulled that off, sealing her fate.

Hawthorn's heart blossomed again, and its single flower was rage. She turned and saw Indigena Yaxley gazing for a moment at the bloodied vines, as if she could not believe the violence of her darlings.

Hawthorn did not cast the Killing Curse again, though she could have. When she had run in the Death Eaters, she had been called the Red Death, and feared for her knowledge of blood curses. That was what she called on now, dropping straight past the times when she was Harry's ally and a werewolf and a pureblood witch, back into the primal violence of her youth.

"Caedes," she spat.

The spell was a single beam of thin red darkness that touched Yaxley in the shoulder. It did not matter where it had touched her, though, because the effect was the same. Yaxley shuddered and bent over as her blood began to force its way through her skin in gouts, imitating the cascades that had fallen from Pansy. She would die in a moment if that kept on, but Hawthorn did not intend that she do so. This woman had killed her daughter. For that, she would suffer.

"Sanguis sanguis," she cast next, the Blood-Renewing Spell. Yaxley's body would work furiously to create the blood to keep her alive, no matter what it cost in pain or strength. And meanwhile, the blood went on forcing its way to her shoulder and outward, and Yaxley was finally beginning to sob with the pain. The plants beneath her skin were writhing, bending into fearsome patterns try to and find some way to stop the flow of blood, but Hawthorn doubted that even they could do much against the fury that had powered her spell.

“Incruentus,” she said, and saw the effect when Yaxley jerked and grunted, her hands moving frantically in the air. That was the Bloodless Curse. It Vanished the liquid from the usual parts of her body that would make blood, including the marrow of her bones from which red blood cells could come. That meant the Sanguis sanguis would have to feed directly on her magic, on her flesh, and on the other liquids in her body—including the liquids in the eye—in order to power itself, which it would need to do because the Caedes spell kept draining the blood out from her skin. Hawthorn had perfected the ability of all three curses to work together during the First War. And now for the final touch, while Yaxley was writhing in what would be only the beginnings of pain.

“Semper fidelis,” she whispered.

The Permanence Curse settled on top of the other three, binding them in place. Even a skilled healer would have a hell of a time undoing them. Hawthorn laughed, and laughed again when Yaxley somehow gathered the strength to Apparate and her plants fell limp all over the battlefield, and found the laughter changing to tears when she knelt beside the torn corpse of her daughter, without awareness of having crossed the intervening ground.

“That’s why you died,” she whispered. “Because you knew that I would grow angry enough to drive her away if she killed you.”

But also because she saw her ending here—she has known what her death was since Halloween—and knew she could not tell me.

Hawthorn cradled her daughter’s severed head. Blood had never troubled her. She let it run down her arms as she kissed Pansy’s lips.

Then she rose and turned to fight, the rage possessing her more fiercely than it ever had during her werewolf transformation.

Draco clamped his arms around the neck of the second iron beast for a moment. He could do this. He could do this, couldn’t he? He and Harry had talked about it yesterday in the strategy meetings. It had seemed simple then. Do this, and then do this, and then do this. Harry would have to face Voldemort alone because he was the only one who could resist the Dark Lord’s magic, and Draco wouldn’t be

able to keep up with the exchange of spells. Besides, Harry would feel the obligation to protect him if Draco was close at his side.

None of which made it any easier to direct the thestral to soar up over the battlefield until he was a good five hundred feet aloft, and then circle there, instead of flying after Harry.

Draco lay along the thestral's neck and closed his eyes. He knew he couldn't fall, since the stirrups clamped his feet in place, and he'd had the thestral coil a few of its whippier spikes around his legs, but he still hesitated for a long moment before his mind leaped free of his body and swept the battlefield, looking for someone to possess.

He found it absurdly easy to locate a Death Eater. The Dark Marks on their arms were like brands of foulness in Draco's mind, steaming piles of shit that he didn't want to step in. He selected one and landed neatly in his head, seizing his mind and slipping on his body like a glove before the idiot could object.

His name was Walden Macnair. Draco felt a certain warm glow—most definitely his own, and not Macnair's—at the memories that name brought up. This was one of the Death Eaters who had entered the Ministry last Midsummer night and tried to kill the Minister. Harry had gone charging in like the hero he was, of course, and could have been wounded or even died. Draco would happily use Macnair to further his own ends.

He made the heavyset body hold up its wand, and Morsmordre flowed easily off its lips, casting the Dark Mark into the air. Those Death Eaters who could still walk, and hadn't been drained of their magic, saw it and rallied to Macnair's side. Draco made the lips stretch in a cruel smile and nodded to each of them as he caught their gazes. All of the man's memories were open to him, and this was what he would do if he was actually trying to plan a counterstrike. The real Macnair was a small hammering presence at the back of his mind, unable to break through the wall Draco had set on him.

"This is what we do," Draco whispered in a voice much hoarser and deeper than his own. "Our Lord just spoke to me through my Mark."

He held up his left arm, and all the other Death Eaters looked suitably impressed. Draco fought to keep from rolling his eyes. "He wants us to go to the foot of the North Tower in Hogwarts and attack there. There's a weakness in the wards. We'll burst inside and be able to attack the students before any of these fools out here knows what we're about."

The other Death Eaters laughed and agreed. Draco again fought to keep from rolling his eyes. Idiots. I'm surprised that none of them think to mention this. For one thing, why would Voldemort send Macnair, of all people? Indigena Yaxley would be the most obvious choice, since she has vines that can bore through stone.

But the twenty Death Eaters he'd gathered followed him across the battlefield without hesitation, ducking around and between the legs of the giants, and more came over as they saw the strength and purpose with which Macnair's delegation was moving. Draco estimated he had thirty-four or thirty-five behind him by the time he halted at the base of the North Tower and nodded to part of the wards. The Death Eaters with him squinted obediently, as if they could see the nonexistent weak place.

"Now," said Draco, and made Macnair hold up his wand. "On the count of three. Use the Blasting Curse. One. Two. Three!"

The Death Eaters eagerly intoned the Blasting Curse, and Draco rose out of Macnair's mind like a falcon just as they reached the last syllables of the incantation. He could hear Macnair shrieking somewhere in the distance as he came back to himself.

It didn't matter. They had no time to retreat. McGonagall had strengthened the wards at the base of the North Tower, as well as a few other places around the school, especially for this trick, and the Blasting Curse bounced from the layered defensive magic and came back at the Death Eaters threefold. Draco heard several screams, most of which ended in a few moments, but one of which went on and on and on.

He opened his own eyes again, and panted. He didn't look at the North Tower. He told himself he wasn't afraid of what damage he'd

caused. He just didn't have the time to pause and survey every disaster he inflicted on Voldemort's forces. He was doing this for Harry, and Harry needed as many of the Death Eaters as possible dying and down. He was tearing Voldemort's power base to shreds today, and anyone on the Dark Lord's side who did survive the battle had to be aware that joining him only meant defeat and death.

Draco gave himself just a moment more of peace on his mount's steady iron back, and then went to kill again.

Ron found himself breathing hard as he charged. Defending other students from an unexpected Death Eater attack was one thing. Going out into the middle of a developing battle, even if it was to help save Hogwarts from the clutches of the Dark Lord, was...something else.

But he had the rage to do it. There was no doubt of that. Since Ginny's wounding on the last day of term, Ron had been in a constant state of low-level rage that made him look forward to a chance to yell, sit on, or punch people in Gryffindor who talked nonsense about Harry. Connor had taken to handing repeat offenders over to him. Ron had found it very satisfying indeed to break Cormac McLaggen's nose. Then Blaise had betrayed everyone, and Ron had held his sister as she cried and dreamed of revenge.

And then, just before he probably would have gone out the gates anyway, as one of the most experienced of the dueling club members, he had heard that George and Fred had come back to the hospital wing, with Fred wounded and not expected to live. Ron had broken into a volley of swearing that made Hermione scold him, before he put the rage back inside himself where it belonged, and planned on how to unleash it.

On his enemies.

He looked upward, and the waves of golden light from the storm were swimming overhead. Harry had explained that the Light respected free will, unlike the wild Dark, and so would not normally interfere in wizarding wars or politics, unless someone dedicated to it committed

a great wrong. But because it so respected free will, it would come to someone who called it on a day like this.

Ron was a Light wizard, from a pureblood family that had followed the Light for generations, and right now he was breathless with rage.

He held up his arm, and he yelled, a wild, incoherent appeal of fury and need.

And the Light answered.

A whirling golden cone descended, looking like a localized hurricane as it bore down on him. Ron found himself floating for a moment as it claimed him. Then it set him back down, but he felt magic leaping and burning in him, ready to defend Hogwarts and harm Dark wizards.

A Death Eater loomed up in front of him, no doubt taking him as easy prey over an adult opponent. Ron held out his wand and incanted a variant of the fire spell. “Incendio!”

The flames that burst from his wand looked more golden than orange, and the Death Eater howled with surprise as his cloak began to burn. He cast it off, and Ron lit his robes on fire, and his shirt underneath them, and then his mask. He staggered away, howling with pain now, and Ron let him go. He didn’t know who had hurt Ginny, so he would settle for wounding those he could get his hands or his wand on.

It was the giants he was really interested in.

He ducked the sweep of a curse above his head—he was Keeper for Gryffindor, and really, this was no harder than dodging Bludgers, or especially Moody’s curses—and zeroed in on a giant that so far had made it across the grounds with only minor scratches and burns. It had just stabbed a spear through a witch with bright golden hair, and as Ron watched, she spasmed and died. Ron sucked in a deep breath, but he had seen children die two weeks ago. He continued charging.

The Light leaped up in him. Giants were considered Dark creatures, and with good reason; like dragons, they simply didn’t care about any

will save their own, and they lacked compassion for the most basic needs of other species.

“Oculis et auribus captus!” he yelled, a spell Moody had made them practice over and over again until they got it right.

The giant bellowed, and Ron snarled, a sound that might have been a smile if he hadn’t been so angry; it wasn’t pleasant, suddenly going blind and deaf. Then the giant swung its club wildly, and Ron rolled under the motion of it and came up on one knee. He was about just beneath the giant’s knees, and he was going to take advantage of that.

Moody had said it would happen this way, in battle, no matter how angry he was. He would see a chance, and he would take it. His instincts had more say in the matter than any strategy. Ron saw what he had to do next the way he saw a move in chess.

“Concutio!”

The Concussive Force Hex left his wand with a jolt that traveled all the way up his arm to his shoulder, and Ron grunted as he briefly went sprawling backward. He scrambled up fast enough to make his vision blur, though, and heard the giant’s knee shatter with a noise not unlike Moody’s wooden leg, when Neville—Neville, of all people!—had finally got through his defenses and put the Hex to work.

The giant tried to take a step anyway, since they weren’t the greatest intellects around, and began to topple like a tree. Ron saw one path out, and took it, not allowing fear a place in his heart, because a Gryffindor didn’t, and ducked forward between its legs. One foot tried to stamp on him, but he was too quick, and came out on the other side as the giant fell beneath him with an impact that jarred him back to his knees.

Ron turned around, but Hermione stepped up just then, aimed her wand at the giant, and said a spell that Ron couldn’t hear. A moment later, the giant began to snore, rackingly. Ron nodded. She’d sent it to sleep. Someone else could handle the Killing Curse; Moody had been emphatic that none of them should try to cast it.

Ron turned, restless as a thestral being fired upon, to seek his next target.

Hermione was relieved that she'd done all right so far. That was what she told herself, at least, as she watched Ron dodge past the falling giant with her heart in her throat. Idiot, to take risks like that! her brain yelled.

She supposed she was taking a risk herself in running up to the giant and casting the sleeping spell right after, but at least it got the giant out of the way. She took a deep breath, and stilled her shaking wand hand. She'd tried to fight back-to-back with Ginny for a moment, but Ginny had seen one of her comrades from the dueling club in danger and gone to help. Since the wound on her arm limited her mobility and the amount of magic she could cast, she was playing mostly a defensive role, and letting other people take care of the offensive.

Hermione knew Zacharias wasn't on the field yet—he was waiting with the golden horses, to charge when the crowd in front of the gates cleared a little—so that was one less person she had to worry about. And she supposed she could follow Ron for a little while and guard his back. The idiot was so angry over Fred getting hurt that he wasn't watching out for himself.

She turned around to track Ron's progress, and a Death Eater jumped gracefully over the fallen giant's back and came down in front of her.

Hermione felt logical thought coil into a lump in the back of her mind and scream. She recognized the man in front of her. He'd caught her on her way back to Gryffindor Tower from Zacharias's room one night and held her captive for an hour while he tried to wake Harry up, whispering in her ear all the while about what he'd like to do to her if they were alone, and what the silver collar around her neck would do to her if Harry didn't cooperate.

Evan Rosier smiled at her and swept her a mock salute. "Do bow, Hermione," he said. "That's what everyone does before a duel. And we must pay attention to the forms of propriety. As one of my favorite

poets says, 'Honour and shame from no condition rise; Act well your part, there all the honour lies.'"

Hermione made herself bow back. She doubted that Rosier knew anything about honor, but he had kept his word to Harry on the matter of the life debt, in a fashion. His adherence to the formal rules of dueling might be all that saved her, because she didn't think she could survive if he simply hit her with anything. Moody himself had managed to survive duels with Rosier, but not bring him down.

Rosier began to circle, smiling all the while. Hermione fixed her gaze on his collarbone, since she couldn't look at his face. Lessons yammered in her head, barking in Moody's voice about watching her opponent's eyes during a duel, but she couldn't. She would see her death, and her violation, written in his face if she tried.

"Good girl," Rosier whispered, in that same breathy tone that he'd used the night he captured her. Hermione wondered if it was possible for a voice to sound like rape. "You're a good girl, aren't you, Hermione? A bit naughty perhaps, sneaking out at night to visit your boyfriend, but I can't imagine you've gone very far. There are parts of you no one has ever seen. Those are the parts I would like to put my mouth on. Cogo!"

Hermione already had a Protego up; Moody had made them practice the Shield Charm, in particular, until they could do it nonverbally, and she'd brought it up during his last few words. The Compression Curse bounced, though it had come in so powerfully that Hermione's shield had trembled and cracked. She dropped that shield and quickly replaced it, and saw Rosier watching her with bright eyes, never having stopped his circling.

"Very good, Hermione," he whispered. "Perhaps, after all, you have some more experience than I thought. Just a little naughty, should we say? Perhaps a bit of knowledge, a bit of wetness at the thought of being touched. Ardesco!"

Hermione could have laughed. That one Harry had taught them, and Moody had warned them that Rosier had a fondness for curses like this one—spells that started in the victim's body, and got in under

shields. She knew the counter of it, binding a Haurio close to the skin and channeling the magic right into the Absorption Charm as it struck her. She was left unharmed, not bursting into flames. Rosier's eyebrows raised a little higher.

"Even better than I imagined," he said, and began to circle faster. Hermione sped up her pace to match him, and when he moved a bit backwards, she moved a bit forwards. She saw a flicker of something in his eyes, and thought she could not imagine it was fear, it made her feel more confident. "Good, good, good. I wonder what would happen if I made you want to spread your legs for me, Hermione. If you—"

She tripped over something on the ground, and fell. Rosier had led her right into the path of a body with the new dueling circle. Hermione struggled frantically to recover, to stand—

And then Rosier's Severing Curse hit her, cutting her open from collarbone to navel, and all the world was pain. Henrietta had not been a Beater on the Slytherin Quidditch team for nothing.

She came in low across the battlefield, clinging to her broomstick and hidden under a concealing charm, because otherwise people would be so unkind as to throw curses into the air at her. Behind and ahead of her raced the Bludgers she'd enchanted to crack bone and obey her and only her. There were five of them, and they circled restlessly, her own destructive, impatient little toys.

She neared the middle of the Hogwarts grounds before she saw something she wanted to hit in the sea of madly struggling figures. She whistled, and one of the Bludgers sped forward and smashed a giant in the skull. It looked puzzled and reached up with one hand to feel the wound instead of immediately collapsing, of course; giants were famous for having thicker heads than humans, in all senses. Henrietta whistled again, and the Bludger turned back to hammer at its target. It was too small for the giant to even see, and far too fast for it to catch. It would keep on hitting until its target fell. Henrietta would trust the people on the ground to get out of the way.

She looked back and forth, searching for some place to send the other four Bludgers. If Yaxley had still been here, she would have been the one to hit, as the most dangerous of Voldemort's Death Eaters. But Henrietta had seen the vines stop lashing a few moments before she joined the battle, so she must be gone, perhaps dead. Henrietta envied whoever had managed to kill her.

Who is most dangerous, then?

Rosier if he's here, but Merlin knows if he's decided to take part in this. Karkaroff, then.

Henrietta stretched out a hand, and one of the Bludgers sped over and hovered in front of her. Henrietta smiled at the little eyes that peered at her out of the rounded top. Learning Transfiguration did indeed have its uses.

"Igor Karkaroff," she said. "Is he here? Lead me to him."

The Bludger turned and streamed away. Henrietta set herself to follow, ducking and dodging among flailing limbs and curses that hadn't hit their intended targets and screams of pain and tragedy. This was for Harry, and this was battle—a real one, not that pitiful little debacle on the beach or the scramble at Woodhouse. Here, the very number of the enemy made them dangerous. Henrietta laughed. She was happy.

Abruptly, one of her other Bludgers made a high, keening whine. Henrietta spun around on her broom to face it. She had enchanted them all to do that if they sensed Rosier, but she couldn't believe that he was really here. There seemed to be too high a factor of chaos in this battle for him to risk it.

"Where?" she demanded.

The Bludger dived. Henrietta followed, letting the concealment charm fall. She knew of no way to fool her Bludgers, and if Rosier was really there, she wanted him to see that his doom was coming for him.

She wasn't in time to warn the brown-haired girl before she tripped and Rosier cast his Severing Curse, but she did have the supreme pleasure of seeing Rosier look up at her over the fallen child, and the expression on his face change from triumph to madness. He was screaming in moments, a cry of frenzied rage, and his wand snapped up to launch Merlin-knew-what curse at her.

Henrietta smiled and made a throwing gesture with her right hand.

The remaining four Bludgers streamed past her, all aimed for Rosier. He Apparated, leaving Henrietta blinking and disappointed, but appeared again only a short distance away. Like homing pigeons, the Bludgers turned, insanely determined to follow him.

Henrietta chuckled as she plowed to a skidding stop in the dirt and cast a clotting charm to keep the girl from bleeding her life out. Then she scooped her gently into her arms. If Rosier had targeted her in particular, then she was probably a close friend of Harry's, and Henrietta would therefore save her life. She only hoped the wards would open to let someone transporting one of the wounded through. Charles cast the Killing Curse, coolly, and the Death Eater witch with long red hair went down. He spun his wand in his hand once, by way of celebration of his victory, and looked around.

He'd been keeping track of both of his sons, a skill born of long practice. Michael was with Severus Snape, shadowing him under a Disillusionment Charm and guarding his weak right side. Snape hadn't liked it, but when Harry had looked at him yesterday and explained that, due to a change in their original plans, Draco would be riding in the air beyond the reach of most danger, and Michael would be guarding him, the man had relented. Charles had been intensely amused. At times, it was fascinating to watch another father-son dynamic at play, even though he would have hated to be in such a relationship with either of the twins.

Owen was shadowing Connor Potter, essentially serving as a guide to defensive magic at the same time as he protected him. Potter was Declared to Light, and Charles knew he wouldn't use half the Dark Arts spells that Owen showed him. That was all right. It was essential

that Potter fight, since he was better-trained than most of the student fighters and they had so few, even with the other allies pouring in across the back of the Quidditch Pitch. And he had to be protected, since he was so important to Harry. Teaching him was a distant goal compared to his survival and what he could contribute to the battle.

He caught a glimpse of Potter then, wielding a blade that blazed with Light, which he'd apparently fetched from the ancestral Potter estate, Lux Aeterna, over the Easter holidays. Owen spun and shielded him from a Cutting Curse, at the same time avoiding getting hurt himself. Charles felt the corners of his mouth lift in a small smile of pride.

Then Potter charged a Death Eater who was getting ready to deal death to a black-haired Ravenclaw—the twin sister of Potter's girlfriend, Charles thought. His dark hair flew, and he yelled bravely, distracting the Death Eater into looking at him. Owen struggled to keep up with him.

And behind him came a second Death Eater, stripped of his mask and so familiar to Charles. It was Karkaroff, formerly the Headmaster of Durmstrang, and a traitor to Charles's sons and every other student who had been in his care. He had entered Owen's blind spot, if Owen was even watching for danger behind him at all and not for danger to Potter in front. His wand was already moving in the beginning stages of the Avada Kedavra curse.

Charles began to run. He cast Concutio at Karkaroff's arm. Whether the man heard him or just instinctively sensed danger, he did jerk away in time, and thus kept himself from acquiring a broken limb. He spun to face Charles, and his eyes narrowed.

Charles dipped his head, the only concession he would make to the formal bow to begin duels, and fought.

He realized in only a few moments that he was outmatched, and why. He himself was a weak Legilimens, and had weak Occlumency walls. Karkaroff was a much stronger Legilimens. He was reading Charles's every move, every spell, out of his mind before he could cast them.

Charles knew his only chance was to use a spell of such power that it wouldn't matter if Karkaroff saw it coming; he still wouldn't be able to block or shield against it. The Blood Whip Curse came to mind. Charles chanted it aloud, and saw with black satisfaction the fear in Karkaroff's eyes when he recognized it.

Someone shouted behind him, and a stunning blow hit Charles's own leg, sending his Blood Whip wide. He fell. He tried to roll over, to stand, and he couldn't. Broken shards of bone clashed together in his knee. Someone had hit him with Concutio. A moment later, the same person hit him with Expelliarmus, and he lost his wand.

That person was a second Death Eater, and he came up to stand over Charles as Karkaroff closed in from the other side. Karkaroff laughed. Charles saw his death in the other man's face.

Then Igor Karkaroff made a mistake, a rather stupid one.

"When you are dead," he whispered, leaning close to make sure that Charles could hear him over the chaos of battle, "I will find your sons. Both of them shall remain my prisoners for as long as my Lord says that I may keep them alive."

Charles narrowed his eyes, and then closed them. He heard Karkaroff laugh in delight. He thought he had made his victim succumb to despair.

In truth, Charles simply wanted to cut off eye contact, and thus Karkaroff's ability to read his mind.

His magic did not shake as he reached for the spell he would need, the only one he was able to cast like this, wandless, his will and his hatred and his protective rage powering it, and insure that Karkaroff did not go on from this moment to hurt his sons.

Their names ran through his mind, blazed in his thoughts from blue letters to red.

Owen. Michael. Medusa.

The red letters grew brighter, brighter, brighter. Charles concentrated, and he could not hear Karkaroff and his companion discussing ways to torture him; he could only hear his wife's voice, and his sons', pledging to him last night that they would take care of their mother if he fell.

Burn, burn, burn.

"Pyra," he whispered.

The Self-Immolation Curse blasted out from his belly, a wheel of flashfire that caught and vaporized both Karkaroff and the other Death Eater in instants. Then it turned back on Charles, hungry, burning, consuming him in his funeral pyre.

He knew that he died smiling.

Harry kicked the thestral into another downward spin. The flesh-dragon followed, close and irritating as ever. Any curses Harry had fired at it had simply skipped off the smooth skin.

Harry was getting frantic. He hadn't been able to absorb magic from the Death Eaters after that initial surge when he'd first flown out of the castle. Voldemort pressed him too closely, and Harry's attempts to drain him were answered with magic so choked with foulness that it only made Harry vomit it back. And then Voldemort had tried to absorb Harry's own power, which, considering how much stored magic he was carrying in the stones, would be disastrous.

I have to do something to distract him, to make him back off for a moment.

Harry invoked the communication spell. The air just above his left wrist buzzed and tingled, and a gull-like screech answered him. Harry blinked. Honoria must be in her Animagus form. He hoped that she would be able to perch in a tree or something soon and do what he required of her.

"Honoria? Can you hear me?" he asked, as he spun the thestral up and over another lightning bolt.

A second screech. Harry nodded at nothing, and whispered what he wanted: a complicated illusion, one that would distract Voldemort as long as possible, and make him think a force had arrived on the battlefield to aid Harry that he was the only one able to handle. Since it was an ally that had aided Harry once before, Voldemort should have no trouble believing it.

Honoria screeched back, and Harry cut the communication spell, wheeling up again so that he could face his enemy. The blasted remains of Voldemort's crimson eyes locked on his across the gap. Harry blinked, then shook his head. Well, of course his eyes remind me of that strange bird's eyes. I already decided that that bird is a message from him, of sorts.

"Did you know," Voldemort said, in the conversational tone that he had been using for most of the battle so far, "that your brother is dead?"

A moment of coldness made Harry's lungs stop working, but he shook his head. Don't believe him. Don't believe him. He's just saying that.

Voldemort took advantage of the distraction, though, sending a Crucio across the gap between them. Harry shuddered and clung to the thestral, grateful again for the stirrups that held his feet in place, riding out the pain. He caught crazed glimpses of light from below as he managed to end the spell, but he couldn't tell if they were symptoms of blurriness in his vision or the sight of the Light storm reflecting off the charging Gloryflower unicorns.

Then Voldemort, who must have felt magic coalesce above him, released a cry of shock and rage, and Harry managed to force his cramped, burning neck muscles to let him look upward.

Honoria had done as he asked. The illusion of an Antipodean Opaleye cut the air overhead, roaring, her jaws giving forth fire. She dived straight at the Death Eaters, and Harry had no doubt that she could and would wreak havoc, for all her glamoured nature. Honoria

was capable of creating the sensation of fire, and of heat, and the conviction in the minds of her victims would do most of the rest.

Voldemort turned the flesh-dragon at once to answer this new threat.

Harry took a deep breath and went back to magic-gulping, passing the power more and more rapidly through him to put into the stones, doing what he could not to think about madness and pain and death in the field below.

Chapter Ninety-One: Children of Godric and Helga

Zacharias steadied his golden horse as it stamped and tossed its mane beneath him. He wasn't entirely sure if it was picking up on his emotions, or whether the Gloryflowers had crafted it just so that it would do these kinds of things, to make it more like a normal horse.

He didn't really care. His whole mind was taken up with Hermione.

Yes, the school was buzzing with other things, other rumors, other gossip, but what did that matter? They were the lesser concerns of lesser mortals. Hermione had come in wounded to the hospital wing; the Headmistress had seen a witch hovering with her on her broomstick beyond the school's wards and apparently recognized the witch, so she'd let them inside. Madam Pomfrey was working on her right now, but the Severing Curse was a tricky spell, difficult to heal. She didn't know if she would save Hermione's life yet. And she had insisted that Zacharias would be a distraction if he stayed in the hospital wing and tried to watch.

So he was going out to ride with the others on the golden horses, as soon as the fighting in front of the entrance hall had cleared enough for them to make a charge. The other riders shifted and whispered and exchanged tense notes about whether they expected to survive on the battlefield, or even odds on who else might come back alive.

Zacharias wanted to scream at them to stop it, that death was nothing to joke about. He understood why they were doing it, though. They didn't have someone possibly dying in the hospital wing.

He had already decided what he was going to do. He simply had to clear his mind of boiling fury enough to attempt it. He sat on the horse's back and let the chatter of his classmates wash over him like the useless blather it was. He had to be calm. He could feel his mother watching him across the gap between their mounts, and wondered if she knew what he was about to do. She was the one who had instructed him in this, long ago, when he was first Sorted into Hufflepuff.

This is a weapon I hope you will never have to use, Zacharias, and certainly not in the middle of battle. It is tricky, not entirely under your control, the way the magic of your wand is. And you stand a chance of losing a part of yourself if you give in to the seductions of the change.

Zacharias knew that was all true; what little information was available on the phenomenon agreed with what his mother had said. In taking on the identity of an ancestor, he risked losing himself.

He did not care. He was angry enough not to care. And this, this breathless pause before they went to battle, was the best chance he would have to calm himself and call out in breathless appeal. The Light storm overhead should help. Both he, and his ancestor in life, had served the Light. And their connection through his being in her House should help, too. Zacharias didn't know if it was going to work, not for certain, but nothing was certain in this process, one reason it hadn't been tried in decades.

Helga? he called. He knew part of her lingered within the school. He'd sometimes been privileged with a glimpse of her, sliding along the corridors or peering at him from behind a tapestry. Zacharias had always imagined he could see her not just because he was a Hufflepuff student, but because he and his family were her last blood heirs. Most of the time, that meant nothing, was no more than a formality he might use to gain a political advantage over people particularly impressed by the Founders and their legends.

But, if she would agree, then he could yield control of his body to her, allow her to possess him and ride forth to battle. Zacharias continued calling her name, his voice steady and sweet, and some moments later he felt the first approach of the shy gentleness he'd always associated with her.

Why? a voice asked him. He might be creating the voice, but he didn't think so, not when he was sincere in his desires to have her spirit possess him. He answered back as if it were real, at least.

Because I am angry, and the woman I love may be dying. And because this battle is being fought at Hogwarts, and threatening the

students you stayed here to protect. And because I am asking. Please?

He felt her regard for long, silent moments. Zacharias realized he didn't even know what having part of Helga's spirit ride out with him would do to the battle. Perhaps it would weaken the defenses of the school, and that would be a good reason for her not to leave. Or perhaps she would have a hard time sensing the other two Founders present in Hogwarts and reconnecting with them, even once her possession of him was done. He hadn't thought of consequences like that. He'd simply asked.

Then she said, Yes.

And Zacharias gasped as magic flooded him.

Oh, of course he'd felt his own magic rise up before: when he first received his wand, when his mother taught him the more complicated spells, when he was confirmed as the magical heir of his family. But it had been nothing like this. Zacharias knew how deep his magical core was, how joined to the rest of him. He was a powerful wizard, but his power did not extend forever.

This was power that seemed to go on rising, like a mountain being pushed up from the collision of continents. The magic shuddered through him, solid as stone, the strength of the earth. Zacharias contemplated that concept in a dazed fashion for a moment. Most wizards didn't care that much about earth magic in comparison to the "mightier" forces of wind and fire and water, but those who did knew it was the strongest of all. The earth had only to shrug, and the continents went scurrying, rivers tumbled from their courses, and the volcanoes shuddered and belched fire.

Helga was the same way. Zacharias felt in a moment as if she'd always been sleeping in some part of him, perhaps his blood, and now she had awakened and claimed the rest of his power. That was all. It was less a losing of himself than an expansion into a piece he hadn't known he had. Suddenly he remembered the days of the Founders a thousand years ago, and the odd thing seemed that he had never done it before.

The change was noticeable. Zacharias, looked around through dazed eyes, saw the other riders staring at him. He apparently had an image hovering over him, superimposed on his features. He suspected it would be the image of a short, plump witch with kind brown eyes—or, at least, they would be kind if they weren't currently lit with battle-fire at the danger to Hogwarts's students.

"It is safe for us to go forth now," said Helga through Zacharias's mouth. It should have been strange to feel his own mouth moving without his will. It wasn't. The voice wasn't his own, so of course he couldn't use it himself. Helga turned towards the wards and nodded.

A face formed in the white mist of the wards, nodding back. Zacharias knew it was Godric Gryffindor, though he hadn't seen that particular Founder before. A moment later, the wards dropped, and the horses foamed forward, heading straight for the break.

Zacharias had ridden horses before, but Helga had ridden all kinds of beasts, horses and flying horses and dragons when she'd had a disagreement with a Hebridean Black over the site of her garden, and she seized control as the better rider. The golden horse lifted and flowed with Zacharias through a quarter-turn that plunged them straight into a mass of Death Eaters, standing back-to-back as they fired curses at a bevy of golden-haired witches and wizards.

Helga let out a battle-cry that hadn't been heard on any field in a thousand years. "Blood and bone and storm and crow!" Zacharias tried to uncover her memories of what it meant, but they were in the thick of battle before he could figure it out, and then he was hurting the people who had helped hurt Hermione.

A spear formed in Helga's hand, the memory of a spear long gone joined to the storm of Light swirling overhead, which recognized the Founder and hailed her with joy as an old comrade. Zacharias felt Light surround him with a dizzying corona that made most of the Death Eaters scream and hide their eyes as the spear plunged down, taking the first victim through the area between collarbone and throat. He fell, and he screamed again, a separate cry from the blinded ones, and Helga laughed and danced the horse backward. It moved with a

grace no living thing could have had. Helga approved of the Gloryflower horses; she wished she could have had one the last time she fought Inferi.

She spun the horse so that she faced the rest of the tangle of Death Eaters, coming back together after her initial charge. She clasped her hands this time, having no need of reins to command her mount, and imagined a quiet brown plain in her mind, suddenly ripping and fracturing open to reveal a pit of deep green and red waiting beneath.

The earth opened under the Death Eaters and dropped them straight down. They cried out as they fell, too. Helga laughed softly. They should know better than to face a Founder on the grounds of her school, she thought, as the horse jumped easily over the crack and landed on the other side. Because it amused her, Helga channeled her magic through the golden hoof as it gave a delicate stamp. The grass and dirt and stone rolled over the heads of her victims when the horse stamped, as easily as if nothing had happened.

Helga whooped aloud and turned to search out the next group of enemies. It had always taken enormous amounts of destruction, or an enormous threat to the students, to rouse her; she had never been of a temper like Godric, who went forth to war at the slightest excuse, or like Salazar, who would nurse his grudges until they were smoldering like lava under the surface. But now she was roused, and her descendant had called her, and what was this Voldemort but another Dark Lord, like Aelfric, like Yellowgorge? She had fought them in her time, been part of the army that fought them, and she had survived. She would survive this, too, and send Voldemort howling.

It is contemptible that he attacks children. Even Yellowgorge never did that, she thought, and charged at the next group of Death Eaters. She was singing as she rode, and the earth sang back to her, long spikes of stone that she had implanted beneath the soil to serve as a last defense spinning for the surface. The Death Eaters did look satisfactorily surprised when they were spitted on them.

Connor went to his knees, and not only because Owen had slammed a hand onto his shoulder urging him to do so, though the older boy would think that was the reason. He'd known a Killing Curse was coming. What Moody said was true: after a while you learned to

identify wand movements out of the corner of your eye, or you didn't survive.

He scrambled back to his feet at once. That wasn't entirely his choice. The sword buzzing and humming in his hand tugged him along.

Connor looked down proudly at the sword as he attacked a Death Eater who had cornered Ginny and was threatening her and the wounded girl she stood in front of. He'd retrieved it from Lux Aeterna over the Easter holidays, from behind a ward that opened to him as soon as it realized that he, and not James, was the Potter heir now. The sword had a sharp, barbed blade, and a hilt so bristling with thorn-like projections that Connor had been unsure how to hold it until the sword itself showed him. It talked, sometimes, but not often, and then it had a male voice, as brusque and commanding as Moody's. It mostly wielded itself, too, which Connor didn't mind, since he didn't know that much about swordwork.

And with the storm of Light in the sky, the sword was active and alive and darting happily around.

Death Eater coming at you from the side, the sword's voice hissed in his head.

Connor knew the opponent must be dangerous. The sword didn't normally warn him about enemies, even the ones who came so close that Owen had to fend them off. He stopped and spun around, nearly spitting Owen. Owen muttered and leaped out of the way. Connor chose not to pay attention to the muttering.

The Death Eater who faced him still wore a mask, and so Connor couldn't focus on his eyes the way Moody had taught them, even as the man lifted his wand and whispered, "Sanguinolentus."

Owen shouted the countercurse. Connor didn't need him to. He'd already ducked. And his eyes were fixed on the man, still. So far, he'd wounded people with the sword, and then run away again as the tide of battle, and the sword's hunger to feed on the Dark, carried him on. He had the sense that this would be his first conscious kill.

Yes, it will, said the sword in his head, and a thick, muffling layer grew over his thoughts. Connor thought it had already been there, but now it was more present, more bracing.

It's to keep you from thinking too much about what you're doing as you kill, said the blade calmly. You would only fall into hysterics, and that's not something you need right now. Right now, you need to be a hero.

And that made sense to Connor. Of course it did. He stood up, and held the sword at the ready. The crystal blade vibrated and buzzed, but the actual sword hung low in his hands, as if he didn't know how to wield it. And Connor was prepared to say that that knowledge wasn't part of his muscles. The sword would wield itself.

The Death Eater whispered, in that same horrible voice, "Dolor."

The curse came at him. The sword jerked up, and the curse bounced off it. The crystal was glowing like a Shield Charm now, and Connor experienced a moment's wistfulness that Harry wasn't there to see it. He always appreciated a good Protego. He would have liked to have seen this, Connor thought.

The Death Eater incanted a wind curse next, one that was probably meant to tear the sword from his hand. But Connor stepped forward, and the gust died as he walked into the middle of it. The Death Eater raised a shield and began to speak a long and complicated curse. Connor experienced a moment's contempt in the part of his mind that was still his own. You don't do that. Moody said you don't do that. It gives your enemy too much chance to hurt you while you're still struggling to reach the end of your spell.

The sword cut through the shield and stabbed straight into the Death Eater's chest.

The man screamed, and Connor saw why when he tried to move away and found he couldn't. Some of the barbs on the edge had hooked into his flesh. And now the sword was glowing like a heartbeat in time with the lazy currents of Light overhead, inflicting

pain on the man. Connor swallowed. "What's that for?" he whispered aloud.

The Light knows what he has done, the sword said in its stern voice. All the murders, all the torture, all the rapes he has committed. So now it is inflicting that pain back on him, making him feel what his victims felt. That is justice.

Connor shivered, and wondered if it really was, but then he reminded himself that he was Declared to the Light, and just because Harry wouldn't approve of this didn't mean it wasn't justice. Harry had a hard time recognizing justice and differentiating it from vengeance.

The sword pulled free at last, leaving the man dead on the ground, and turned Connor in a different direction. Just before he completed the spin, Connor caught a glimpse of Owen's face. His eyes were dark and thoughtful, and not all of what was in his expression was approval, either.

Connor looked away, and let the sword tug him deeper into the tides of battle.

Snape could not watch Harry as much as he would have liked, because he had to pay attention to the battle on the ground.

He'd already dueled several Death Eaters whose fighting styles he recognized of old, though he hadn't known their names then, and hadn't heard of them even during the short time he'd spent in Azkaban before Dumbledore rescued him. It didn't matter. Their feints and parries and counterattacks were more important in a battle than their names and past histories, in any case. He traded counterattacks with them, and he either finished them or was swept away in the surging chaos. Their side was killing the Death Eaters, but five hundred wizards were not defeated that easily.

And their side suffered losses, too. Snape had heard about the Weasley twins before he entered the battle. He had briefly seen Hawthorn Parkinson, fighting like a woman possessed, and knew that only the loss of her daughter could reawaken the Red Death. He watched from a distance, too far away and too separated by wizards

to do anything, as Rosier felled the Granger girl. And after the charge of the golden horses began, he saw the last giant on the field step directly on top of the Chang girl, crushing her out of existence.

More appalling, at least to his eyes and soul, was the loss of the only one of his Slytherins riding a golden horse, Catrina Flint-Digsby. She was busy unleashing binding curses on the Dark wizards in front of her, trying to weaken them and give the younger students easy victims, and she never saw the Avada Kedavra that took her from behind. For that matter, Snape never saw her killer. When he turned to look, the faceless figure had already vanished in another wall of surging flesh.

Snape had used the Killing Curse three times in a row after that, on the next three victims he faced, and the Rosier-Henlin boy fighting close at his side had never uttered a word of condemnation.

Now, at last, he burst into a clear space and could lift his head, staring at Harry. Voldemort was still contending with what Snape knew must be an illusory dragon, since Harry had told him about Acies's refusal to bring a true dragon to the battle. Harry flew his iron thestral in a circle and drank and drank and drank magic. Snape saw numerous pitiful, screaming shapes on the ground, and knew that must be Harry's doing. Suddenly turning into a Squib would be quite a shock.

He had to quell his fear and pain; Harry was doing magnificently. He either wasn't aware of the losses beneath him—and Snape had to admit that he might not be aware of individual deaths—or had learned to put them aside and do what had to be done. Snape felt a moment of shining hope. If Harry could indeed do what he had planned, it would wound the Dark Lord more deeply than any individual strike ever could.

"Sir, look out!"

Michael flung him to the ground. Snape ducked his head into the earth himself as he realized that Voldemort had destroyed the glamour of the dragon. Bits of magic were raining to earth, spell-flakes from whatever curse he had used. Snape tried not to breathe

them in. It was generally a good idea not to let the Dark Lord's magic affect one.

He looked up after that, though, thinking Voldemort would return to his pursuit of Harry at once. He certainly couldn't let Harry drain the magic from every one of his living followers on the field. Snape's left arm burned with the reminder of Voldemort's temper.

But instead, the grotesque beast Voldemort had created, a mockery of even the illusory dragon he had just destroyed, simply hung in the air. Snape squinted, trying to make out the movements of his wand, but his former master was safely concealed behind that slick pink neck. He had no chance of learning what spell he would cast before he cast it.

He recognized the effect, though, when a dark purple bruise formed in the air not far above the battlefield, and thunder spoke in a death-rattle. Voldemort had not started the spell higher because the storm of Light would probably have stopped it, and because he wanted his victims to suffer more. Snape recognized it because he had once tried to help his Lord create a potion that would mimic the effect before Voldemort designed the spell: Imbrifer Voro.

Where the rain fell, it would flay the flesh, as it had in Valerian, the wizarding village Voldemort had devastated in the summer of 1980.

Snape scrambled to one knee and tapped his wand against his left arm, ignoring the pain of his Dark Mark, desperate to invoke the communication spell and warn Harry what they were about to face. He heard a shout, and looked up to see another pair of Death Eaters running at him, but Michael was holding them off, for now, his wand flashing in quick spellwork that made Snape suffer a brief, irrational pang that Rosier-Henlin had decided to send his sons to Durmstrang.

"What is it, sir?" Harry's voice was tight, and Snape didn't blame him. Even with the stones in his robe pockets as reservoirs, the effort of passing that much power through his body would tire him.

"Voldemort is calling the flesh-eating rain," Snape said tightly. "The purple spot a little behind you and off to the side."

Harry was silent for a moment, and Snape wondered if the communication spell had faltered. But when he looked up, he realized that Harry was flying the iron thestral like a Firebolt—just not in the direction of that bruise.

“Harry!” Snape shouted.

“There’s a second one,” said Harry, in a voice that said he was speaking from between clenched teeth. “And it’s right above Draco.” Draco again leaped out of a dying Death Eater’s mind, this time a witch. He shook his head as he opened his eyes and sat up on the thestral’s back again. He had never quite got used to possessing someone female. It always left him feeling as if he had appendages he didn’t, and lacked some of those he did, for hours afterward.

He looked up to see Harry flying at him, and blinked, wondering why. Sure, there was thunder speaking above him, but that was to be expected when there was a storm in the sky, wasn’t it?

A drop of rain fell abruptly on his arm, and Draco screamed, even before he jerked his head away from Harry and stared at his skin. It was peeling neatly away from his left forearm, in a way that Draco had only ever imagined happening if he received the Dark Mark. The iron beast he rode jerked and shuddered beneath him as his panic translated downwards.

Another drop hit on his head, and Draco shouted with the pain. His scalp was splitting open, and he could just imagine the next drop hitting on the tender and unprotected bone of his skull. He began to flee wildly towards Hogwarts, not knowing what else he could do.

“Draco!”

That was Harry’s shout, and Draco, despite his better judgment, turned the thestral around. Harry slid past him, crouched low in his own saddle, a desperate, focused look on his face. He flung his arm out, and a shimmering cage of green light formed around Draco, a ward that Harry added to as he turned and rode past again, and then

again. When Draco looked up, he saw the sharp-edged rain being deflected from the edges of the cage.

He looked at Harry in wonder. Harry gave him a grim smile, and then dived. Draco looked on in astonishment as a green ward spread out from him like a spiderweb, a flat plane between sky and ground, fed from Harry's magic. Draco had never seen the spell before, but that didn't surprise him. Harry was full of such power at the moment that just being near him had made Draco's heart shudder and jump. He could probably do much more than this, if he wanted.

And he'll be afraid of that, and that's part of what's holding him back, Draco thought, as he went on watching, safe in his own drifting cage.

The ward spread further and further, billow on billow of green. Now it looked less like a spiderweb, and more like a storm in imitation of the storm of Light above. It coiled under Voldemort's purple bruise, which Draco saw when he looked for it, and refused to let any of the flesh-eating rain through. Draco caught a glimpse of white-blond hair, and was extremely glad of it. The thought of either of his parents flayed alive by that rain was more than he could bear.

Come to that, my wounds don't look that good, either.

Draco drew his wand and laid it against the wound in his arm, concentrating. Harry had taught him some of the most basic healing spells. He ought to be able to handle this.

"Integro," he murmured, and watched in satisfaction as the skin regrew over the wound. He wasn't sure about the one on his scalp. It did hurt, but he didn't want to try and heal it without a mirror. He put his left hand up, and felt gingerly at the cut. It seemed to have stopped bleeding. He decided to trust that it'd clotted, and looked back to find out the outcome of what Harry and Voldemort were doing.

He saw Harry rising up out of the green ward, and Voldemort riding straight towards him, bent over the neck of the flesh-dragon—the ugliest thing Draco had ever seen, far uglier than the iron animals he and Harry rode—and casting a curse that filled the air between them with whirling diamond shards.

Harry was tiring.

He could feel it in every muscle of his body. His legs gripped the thestral too hard. His feet pressed into the stirrups until his ankles ached. His throat burned every time he took a breath, though he thought some of that came from breathing in the reek of Voldemort's beast earlier. His arms shook when he moved them, and his hand was a joke; he didn't know how he'd managed to cast the first ward straight at Draco and not out into the wide and empty sky. His vision spun with the effort of watching out for Voldemort's spells and dodging them, and thinking faster than his opponent. And his magical core was overstretched with the sheer amount of magic he was passing through it into the stones, themselves full and warm with power.

He had not realized being a conduit for the magic was so exhausting. He had to fight himself every step of the way. The absorbere gift was meant for swallowing, he was learning now, or for vomiting back a wave of power in his opponents' faces, and not for simply acting as a tunnel through which the magic could pass on the way to somewhere else. Holding himself open like that, envisioning a passage instead of a mouth, hurt. He felt as though someone had been beating him with sticks from inside his skin.

And he had to fight the temptation to feast on the magic and make it part of himself, too, on two fronts. First was the mental distancing effect, the natural attraction that whispered the battle and the purpose Harry intended to use the magic for weren't half so important as exercising his will. Second was the absorbere gift trying to snap shut. He couldn't let that happen.

And now Voldemort, the bastard, was attacking his allies—no, it was him again, with the sun glittering sharply on the diamond shards that were rapidly closing the distance. At least Draco was no longer in immediate danger, and Harry could deal with the threat without losing his mind.

Harry uncoiled a tendril of the magic and sent forth a cone of intense light and heat, though it was in liquid form, the liquid he had once

heard Hermione informing Ron actually comprised the sun. It poured on the shards and dissolved them. Of course, then Harry had to weave a net beneath the sun-liquid to keep it from plummeting to earth and harming his allies.

That was a stupid mistake, he thought, as he dodged the thestral around yet another bolt of lightning. That was a mistake Moody would punish me for. I should have used a different weapon.

“Tired, Harry?” Voldemort whispered as he sent another attack, a small ball of darkness that broke apart into many small balls and whizzed at Harry like Bludgers, ducking under and around Harry’s defenses and forcing Harry to send many small counteracting balls of light after them. “You could get rid of me if you would only use that magic. I can feel you roiling with it. You could grow, as I have grown. I gave you the absorbere ability that night in Godric’s Hollow, Harry. I know how it works. It is not simply a mechanism that you can use. Its purpose is to feed you and sustain your strength, very like the blood-drinking ability of a vampire. Any moment now, it will close, and force you to absorb what you have taken into your body. You cannot stop it any more than you can stop your stomach from digesting food.”

“Shut up,” Harry snapped, and then realized he was losing his hold on his temper and his emotions. His attention was necessarily divided into three: focusing on Voldemort’s words, maintaining the wards he had spun over the battlefield and Draco to shield them from the flesh-devouring rain which hadn’t stopped falling, and scooping magic from the Death Eaters. He shuddered and bent double as a tide of tainted magic flowed through him. The tunnel he kept envisioning trembled and nearly snapped shut. Harry thought he was holding it open by brute strength now.

Voldemort laughed softly, in delight, and pulled up his flesh-dragon. Harry watched him warily, but he sent no more spells. Instead, the snake stuck its head around the dragon’s neck to watch him. Harry frowned at him in confusion.

“I will watch you,” Voldemort remarked. “This is a possibility that I did not foresee, Harry: that you would swallow so much tainted magic that it would swamp your own and make you into a Dark Lord. In a

few moments, you will be my heir in truth, unless you expel what you have taken, now.”

Harry could feel an edge of compulsion riding that word, and he had to fight to ignore it. He clung to his “meal,” and forced away the image of himself as a Dark Lord, uncaring about others, detached from them by the river of power flowing between him and them.

Voldemort laughed again. Harry closed his eyes, and admitted to himself that he needed help.

So he did what he hadn’t dared to do so far, because, after all, he had not Declared. He reached up and asked the storm of the Light, the wild Light if there was such a thing, for help.

And the Light answered him. Perhaps it was only because he was fighting the Dark Lord and not because it considered him a Light wizard. Harry didn’t know. He did know that he was suddenly bathed in a flood of gold, like pure, concentrated sunlight.

It struck through him like the phoenix fire, and made many of the impurities he had swallowed turn to smoke and vapor. It filled him with the memory of gryphon wings and flexing talons, and tearing the flesh of the wild Dark, forcing it back into limits. It reminded Harry of why his restraining himself was good, because to do otherwise would only be another instance of the strong conquering the weak. The self-restraint of Lord-level wizards was the salvation of the free will and sanity of others.

And it made him understand, for a moment, why his parents, and his brother, and Dumbledore, and Sirius, and Peter, had all Declared for Light, what about this great and golden force had attracted them.

Exultant, Harry stretched out his hand and laughed. He opened his eyes to see Voldemort’s snake staring at him, and smiled.

“I am not like you,” Harry said softly. His skin glimmered with gold as he spoke, as if the sun were creeping through him, and he felt courage rushing up behind the gold, propelling him back into battle. It did not matter if the fight was hopeless, because it had to be fought

anyway. "I care about free will as much as wildness, and cooperation with others as much as doing things by myself. My parents and Dumbledore came much nearer to making me a Dark Lord than I ever will on my own." He clasped his hand over the stump of his left wrist and extended them towards Voldemort. "Fiat lux!"

Light burst from his fingers and struck Voldemort. Harry could see the flesh-dragon starting to melt away like a bad dream, its feet melting into the blocks of goo that which had lain on the battlefield when Voldemort corrupted the bodies of his victims. Voldemort screamed and rode the dragon down a short distance, getting out of range of the stream of Light.

Harry turned his head towards the Forbidden Forest as he caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of his eye, and saw centaurs pouring onto the battlefield. They carried spears and war-hammers, and one of them played a drum. Harry laughed. They had told him, once, how many hundreds of years it had been since wizards and centaurs had fought side by side, but he had forgotten.

With a fuller heart than he had possessed in some time, he lifted his hand so that the stream of Light glowed back into the sky like a beacon, and swirled towards the school, to drain those Death Eaters who were trying to attack the wards. For once, he thought as he glanced back and saw Voldemort laboring after him on his half-melted beast, he was forcing the Dark Lord to fight defensively.

Ginny pulled hard at Padma's arm. "Come on," she whispered. The Ravenclaw had been wounded on the back by a Death Eater she'd managed to kill, and then wounded again on the arm by the one who'd attacked her after that. Ginny had found her lying in the churned, trampled mud, in shock, and had to slap her several times to get her to move. Now they were almost back to the wards, but Padma had fallen again, and the wound on Ginny's arm that she'd received in the attack on the carriages was throbbing. She didn't think she had the ability to carry Padma with one limb so weak.

"Come on, Padma, come on, please," she whispered, crouching over her and stroking her hair. "Come on, you can see your sister again, she's safe in the school. You want to see her again, don't you?"

Parvati had been one of the dueling club students who'd remained behind to safeguard the younger ones, since Moody hadn't judged her trained enough to accompany them onto the battlefield.

Ginny squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. Her mind was wandering. Mud and blood and death and pain surrounded her in every direction, and she didn't think Fred was going to live, and she had to get Padma back to Hogwarts.

"Come on," she repeated, and was about to begin the next round of coaxing when she heard hoofbeats. She lifted her head in fear. They'd barely managed to dodge the golden horses once before, and then the herd of silver unicorns after that. Ginny would have to crouch over Padma now and hope that the horses or unicorns jumped them if they were coming round again.

But it was a herd of centaurs instead, and they were slamming broadside into the Death Eaters like a whole bevy of Killing Curses. Ginny shivered as she watched one spear driven so far through a cloaked figure that it plunged out his back, planted itself in the mud, and then impaled its victim completely. She had never realized what kind of force a spear with the strength of a charging centaur behind it would carry.

The main group pounded past them, but one, a dark chestnut, wheeled around and trotted towards them, his black tail billowing. Ginny stared at him uncertainly. She had been raised on evil tales of rogue centaurs and what they did. Besides, she thought this herd was only friendly to Harry.

"My name is Bone," said the centaur in a deep voice. "Is your friend wounded?"

Ginny nodded, responding automatically to such a sensible question. "I don't think she'll make it back to the castle without help."

"Then come with me," said Bone, and dropped to his knees in the mud. "Climb onto my back," he added patiently, when Ginny just stared at him again. She had never heard of a centaur lowering

himself enough to let any human ride him—again, with the exception of Harry, but Harry was the exception to everything.

Biting her lip, Ginny managed to drag Padma the few feet that separated them from the centaur. Then she draped her over Bone's back, and asked, "Can you carry two of us?"

"You are small," said Bone. Faint amusement tinged his voice.

Ginny waited, but he said nothing else. Carefully, she slung one leg over his back and then climbed up, holding Padma in place over his withers.

The centaur rose and trotted towards the castle. Ginny didn't dare believe they were safe until she saw the wards dip for them and then rise, closing behind them. Then she had to shut her eyes so the tears wouldn't fall, even as she gave Padma over to the eager, reaching arms of her sister.

She turned to thank Bone, but he had already charged out of the wards again and back onto the battlefield. Ginny wondered for a moment if she should join him, but Professor Sprout stepped up then, took one look at her arm, and began to cluck about taking her to the hospital wing and Madam Pomfrey.

Ginny sighed, and tried to be satisfied with what she'd accomplished so far. At least, if she was going to the hospital wing, she could check on Fred.

Minerva knew how many students had been wounded or killed since Voldemort's initial attack. Godric was keeping track of them for her.

Eighty dead, thirty-one wounded.

For the moment, Fred Weasley and Hermione Granger were in the "wounded" category. Minerva had spoken with Poppy, though, and the matron refused to reassure her that that would not change by the end of the day.

Minerva stood now in the window of her office and watched as the centaurs joined the battle. They might be enough to turn the tide. They would never be enough, because nothing would, to bring back the dead.

She took a deep breath, and fought the urge to close her eyes as she saw another of the golden horses fall into an explosion of blood and churned earth from a detonating curse, marking the place where another of her students had just died. Godric's voice echoed softly in her head, changing the toll to eighty-one.

She could not be out there on the battlefield fighting, much as she wanted to, much as her fingers twitched and reached for her wand, because she had a school to protect. And she would protect all the students in it. Though she desperately wanted the wounded Gryffindors, her students, her lions, to live, she could not feel less desperation for Zacharias Smith, whom Godric had told her had called Helga to him, or for the Ravenclaw Patil girl Ginny Weasley had rescued from the battlefield.

Or even for my Slytherins, she thought, eyes on Harry as he wheeled low past the school, making three Death Eaters beneath him suddenly slump to the ground. Minerva could feel the force of his absorbere ability pulling on the wards for a moment, and then he was past and up and gone. She tilted her head back to watch him. The determination in her solidified like steel forged in a tempering fire.

Yes, they are my Slytherins, now, as much as they are Severus's. I think I could set the wards around their common room without help if I had to try again.

And she would stand by her students in all things, she thought, her hands pressing into the stone hard enough to hurt as she watched Harry pause to exchange another flurry of spells with Voldemort. That meant defending what they had done in the name of defending Hogwarts.

She had heard Voldemort's announcement this morning of Harry killing children by the lake. Everyone had. It was the one thing that could distract her students from talk of the battle—at least, students

who didn't have siblings or parents or cousins fighting on the grounds. They were muttering, building fear in their eyes and their minds and their hearts, wondering if Harry could be responsible for killing them, too, if they pushed him far enough.

Minerva was sure there was a good explanation, and she would wait until Harry could give it to her, and then she would stand by him no matter what happened.

They are my students, she thought, forcing herself to be still as she saw the horse that bore Helga just barely escape a Killing Curse. All of them.

Harry surveyed the battlefield for a moment. He had the time. Voldemort was coming up behind him again, but he was slowed by his dragon's half-melted state, and his own rage. He obviously couldn't think of many spells to send at Harry that he hadn't already sent, and he was wary of simply contributing magic to Harry's growing stream of it.

He was surprised to see how many Death Eaters were dead. Perhaps fifty were left alive, and they were trying to retreat, though his allies weren't really letting them. The last giant had fallen, and the centaurs were running freely across grass that only an hour ago would have sprouted plants to snare them, bunching for massed cavalry charges against those Death Eaters stupid enough to stand and resist them, and then scattering apart again to chase the fleeing survivors. The grounds were thick with death.

The sight of all those piled bodies did not make Harry feel good. But he felt considerably better than he would have had the sight been a devastated, cracked-open Hogwarts filled with the bodies of students instead.

He lifted his head, wondering if it wasn't time to begin his final taunting of Voldemort that would sting the Dark Lord into chasing Harry and Draco to the place of their final confrontation.

A flicker of movement in the air caught his eye. Harry turned the thestral quickly. Was Voldemort brewing another killing storm?

But the shape that soon resolved itself was far stranger. It looked like a massed flight of winged horses, bearing riders. From the horses' bodies depended chains, leading to something enormous that hung and swayed gently beneath them. Harry thought he could see gold, but that was not unusual; the Light storm was reflecting off whatever it was. Polished glass, metal, water? Harry thought it must be a trick of Voldemort's, since he hadn't asked any of his allies to do something like this, but couldn't imagine that it was dangerous. Voldemort would have used such a weapon to threaten the children in Hogwarts before now.

Then the winged horses passed into the shade of a less intense part of the Light storm, and Harry could see what they were supporting. A tank, filled with water and swarming bodies.

And then the sirens began to sing, and as Harry saw compulsion twining around the minds of everyone beneath him, he felt the balance of the day once more tip towards despair.

Chapter Ninety-Two: A Body Made of Music

Harry looked down at the battlefield as the sirens' songs began, automatically fighting off their influence as he built a core of concentrated rage and flung the attempts at compulsion into his Occlumency pools, and saw his fighters faltering. One golden horse had been charging and creating carnage, sometimes carrying the flickering image of a woman on its back and sometimes carrying Zacharias Smith. Now the horse slowed altogether as its rider stared up at the sirens. Then he or she nodded obediently and turned in the direction of Hogwarts. Harry wasn't entirely sure if the sirens were going to command his people to drown themselves in the lake or simply go back to the castle, but either way they were targets.

Even Voldemort's Death Eaters were targets, as they began walking towards the castle, and Voldemort did not seem to care. He was laughing exultantly, and Harry spun towards him, glaring. He caught a glimpse of the snake's head weaving around the dragon's neck before Voldemort called across the gap between their mounts, his voice loud and mocking.

"Did you think that you had tamed them, Harry? But they are not for you to tame. What could you offer them but self-restraint, a life of change or of tameness beyond a web? When I explained to them what a vates was, what kind of limits you wanted to impose on the magical creatures, they understood at once. They did not want to ally with you. I offer them more freedom than you ever will."

Harry didn't waste his breath on answering. He swung the iron thestral and rode directly at the tank, wondering, as he went, whether he could smash the tank open and let the sirens plummet to their deaths. A single kick from his mount's hoof might be enough to shatter it.

He had accepted the necessary deaths of Dark wizards who stood to oppose him, and he'd had to accept the same for magical creatures when he realized Voldemort had allied with the giants. He would be sorry to cause the deaths of the sirens, but if they were bent on causing the deaths of his own fighters, he had no choice.

A flung Avada Kedavra nearly made him start, until he realized that it came from a wizard riding one of the winged horses. Harry cursed as he counted a dozen of them, all of them in the dark cloaks and white masks of the Death Eaters, and all of them determined to protect the sirens' tank. They were hindered by their horses' chains, but, on the other hand, they had only to fight defensively. Harry was the one who had to fight offensively, trying both to get past their magic and to break the tank.

Perhaps I don't have to close with them, though, Harry thought, and sacrificed a bit of the magic he'd eaten in a long, curling dark tendril, shooting straight through the impressive array of Dark curses and smashing into the tank.

The glass shimmered, and did not crack. Harry snarled as wards, invisible before, sprang to life, wound into the glass. Layered defensive magic, layer after layer, and not all of them spoke of Voldemort's work, either. Some of it was magic that Harry had never seen before, which he suspected came from the sirens. He tried again, with a stronger bit of magic this time, and realized, as a single sharp-edged ward sprang up to turn it aside, that there could be endless wards strung around it. He might waste moments hammering at the tank before he broke it.

And in the meantime, his fighters were still walking mindlessly towards the school, both centaurs and wizards. Harry cursed again. By allowing the centaurs to fall victim to compulsion, he was abandoning his vates duties.

Only two human figures on the battlefield didn't seem caught by the sirens' song. Harry recognized the tall one as Snape; of course, since he was an Occlumens and had had experience with siren songs once before, he'd probably worked on building his mental defenses. And the other was—

Connor?

Of course, Harry thought a moment later, relieved. You cannot compel a compeller.

And then Voldemort lifted his hand almost lazily. One of the dark cones of light he'd used on Harry earlier blasted down and tore into the back of Harry's defenseless, stumbling allies. A witch who looked like one of the Gloryflowers died without a sound, and others tumbled, bleeding. But they rose to their knees in the next moment and began moving towards the school again, while the sirens' songs played like silver harps around them.

Harry screamed in anger, and abandoned his attempts to get to the sirens' tank. He had to defend his allies first and foremost. He flew towards the school, and heard Voldemort laugh again as he passed him. Harry glanced at him, then pulled the iron thestral up and felt himself go very still.

Voldemort's flesh-dragon had one half-melted paw clamped around the second iron thestral, and Draco sat, glaze-eyed, just under the dragon's jaws. The teeth, jagged implanted spikes of bone, were parted delicately around Draco's head.

"I think we should discuss some things first, Harry, before you go to the rescue," Voldemort said sweetly.

Connor didn't understand what the fuss was about. People started turning around and going back towards Hogwarts, and he assumed he must have missed a general call to retreat. Then he discarded that. After all, there were still Death Eaters walking around, so the battle wasn't over. Granted, the air was full of an irritating buzzing noise, but so? That didn't matter.

Then he realized that buzzing noise seemed to matter to everyone else, and when a shadow passed over him, he lifted his head and saw the block of glass swaying on the end of its chains between the winged horses. The glass was full of water, and swarming shapes with long blonde and red and blue hair, from the glimpses that Connor caught. And fish tails.

Sirens. That's right. Harry said something about Voldemort having freed the sirens last year.

Connor took a deep breath. Well, he had the ability to resist the sirens. He could, maybe, use his compulsion on the people now wandering witlessly towards the castle, which included even Owen, he saw with a quick glance around. He could urge them to come back. But he didn't think he could control that many people at once, and besides, that was still compulsion. Connor winced to think what would happen when he had to explain to Ron how he'd ordered him to do things.

What should I do?

He stared up at the tank, and bit his lip. Harry was up there somewhere, but he couldn't have a solution to the problem, or Connor was sure the sirens would have stopped singing by now. Perhaps he was busy fighting off Voldemort and making sure he didn't hurt anyone else. That left this particular problem up to Connor.

He took another deep breath, laid down the sword on the ground—it didn't protest, now that there were no more Death Eaters to fight—and then drew his wand. “Accio Nimbus 2001!” he shouted, remembering how Harry had summoned his Firebolt during the First Task of the Triwizard Tournament last year.

A quick flicker of movement above the Quidditch Pitch, and then a broom came zooming towards him. Connor occupied himself in the moments until it arrived by staring at the walking mass of people and trying to make out his friends. He caught an occasional glimpse of red hair, but it could have been almost anyone. Some people were crawling on their knees, despite dripping wounds. Connor shuddered, and felt fire fill his eyes and his belly.

That is wrong. It is wrong. I am going to go up there and do something about this to set it right.

There were some people who weren't moving in the general direction of the castle, Connor noticed when his broom finally arrived and he swung a leg over it. They were all in the robes of Death Eaters, but most of them bore the marks of curses: missing limbs, deep wounds in their chests, burned and torn clothing. When one turned towards

him and stared with blank eyes, he understood. Inferi, probably, or reanimated corpses.

But though they were dangerous, and had blood on their hands, indicating recent kills, Connor didn't feel threatened or afraid. He thought he heard a distant bark, and felt a lifting-up of his heart. He smiled at them, and then he rose, heading straight for the tank and the flying horses around it. He intended to keep beneath the tank until he was right up close to it. He didn't want the riders noticing him and launching curses at him.

Snape stared intently into the sky, letting the compulsion of the sirens' song slide off him moment by moment, forcing himself to hear it as an ugly buzzing and not a beautiful sound. What was Harry doing? He should have been down among the compelled victims by now, snapping the web of the sirens' song, or he should have smashed the tank.

Then the flesh-dragon drifted into view, a flash of iron visible close against its side, and Harry circling it on his own thestral. His body was so still that Snape knew what must have happened. Voldemort had Draco. No one else would have made Harry react that way, and forget the others suffering beneath him.

Snape parted his mouth in a snarl. I suppose this is up to me, then. I make a poor guardian for anyone but Harry, but so be it.

He turned and began firing binding curses and Body-Binds at the crawling, stumbling, mindlessly walking people—like Inferi, all of them. Snape felt sharp contempt for those unable to resist the spell of a little music, and used that contempt to fuel his incantations. When his victims began collapsing to the ground, wrapped in magic or ropes, he used Mobilicorpus to separate the Death Eaters from the students and Harry's adult allies.

He did not allow himself to think about what would happen if he was unable to capture some of them before they reached the castle—where Minerva would probably feel compelled to open up the wards to them—or the lake, where they would drown themselves. He worked.

Harry circled Voldemort, and felt sickness assault his stomach and bite his throat, his vision burning bright yellow. He kept trying to think about battle, and the thoughts kept sliding away under the influence of those jagged teeth posed around a blond head.

"They make a fetching picture, don't they?" Voldemort whispered. Harry could feel the pressure of his eyes—or, more accurately, the pressure of his snake's eyes—but he refused to look at him. His whole being was focused on Draco.

I have to get him out. I have to tear him free.

"I am tempted to keep them like this," Voldemort continued. "To know that you are helpless to do anything else, look anywhere else, until your lover's peril is resolved. How sweet. Love, the weapon of my enemies, is turned upon them and becomes their greatest weakness. So it has always been." He leaned around the dragon's neck and ran a hand like a white spider down Draco's cheek. Harry shuddered convulsively, as if it had been himself that Voldemort touched, and saw the Dark Lord smile.

"The price is the same as always," Voldemort breathed. "If you come to me of your own free will, if you surrender and bind yourself with an Unbreakable Vow not to hurt me or my Death Eaters again, then I shall bind myself with a similar vow not to hurt your lover."

Harry tried to breathe. His chest was too tight. He tried to think. His mind was too tight. He kept rebounding on the fact that Draco was in danger, and love and fear were such a twined chorus that he honestly couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

"I think I grow bored of this tableau, lovely as it is," said Voldemort. "We must change the stakes."

That was Harry's only warning before the dragon turned and scraped one bone tooth down Draco's head, parting skin and hair as delicately as the flesh-eating rain had done. Harry shouted, but heard no words in his own shout; it sounded more like a half-strangled sob. Voldemort threw a mock-concerned look in his general direction, and

then stroked the side of the dragon's neck, making it gently dislodge its tooth from Draco's flesh.

"Is something the matter, Harry?" he asked. "Something you would like to say to me? Something you would like to promise?"

Harry tried to wake up. He tried to find that level of thought he'd been able to sustain while the children were under the Life-Web. He had managed, then, to reason out that the correct course of action was to kill them, even though he hadn't wanted to, even though it was horrible, and part of the conviction had come from the fact that nothing was more important than saving lives, he could not save their lives, and people were dying behind him as he hesitated.

But those children had not been Draco.

A gap opened as he hovered there, indecisive, a crack in his morality that let him look straight into his heart, and what he saw there made him sick. He did care more about Draco's life than the lives of a dozen children. He was not the person he had thought he was, who, while admitting that some people were more important to him than others, could supposedly accept their deaths and go on. He could not accept this death. It would destroy him if those jaws closed, and those bone teeth came down, and Draco died. He might turn his back on Draco and go into the battle, declaring one life less important than the majority, but he would not live long after that. If nothing else, his self-disgust would deprive him of his will.

But the choice that Voldemort offered him was impossible, too. He could not abandon his allies the way that surrendering himself to that Unbreakable Vow would require him to.

He bowed his head, and heard Voldemort laugh.

Connor paused halfway up to the tank to cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself, because Moody had taught them all how to cast them and, really, one of his best lessons was that your enemies should remain unaware of you as long as possible. Then he went on flying, peering closely at the tank.

It appeared to be made of glass, but Connor's plans to just hurl Concutio at it and smash it that way vanished as he realized that the glass glimmered with the lines of numerous wards. He couldn't break through them with magic—and where there were that many wards, there would be others. That was part of Moody's lessons, too.

He flew in a circle for a moment, biting his bottom lip again as he considered the dilemma. He had to do something, because Harry was unable to do something, or he would have done the something already. But what?

Then he knew.

Connor shifted uncomfortably on his broom. He didn't like the thought of what he had to do, and Harry would like it even less. The only person who had ever given him lessons and thought this was a good idea had been Voldemort himself, in the guise of Sirius. Connor knew, from watching his parents and Dumbledore and Sirius, how what seemed a good weapon at first could corrupt you. He wasn't going to defeat his enemies but lose his soul.

But no one else was doing anything about the tank. When he glanced off to the side, Harry hovered motionless in front of Voldemort's dragon, apparently talking to him. Snape was working to slow people down on the battlefield, but that wouldn't change the balance of the sirens' voices. They would still compel people, Connor thought, and sooner or later the compulsion would include the order to attack anyone who tried to prevent them from reaching the lake or wherever the sirens were really sending them. And what if people in Hogwarts were hearing the sirens? Voldemort would have a whole school of helpless hostages.

He had no lesson to help him, nothing but the decision to take action now and bear the consequences later.

Like Harry, come to that, he thought, and nudged his broom around the edge of the tank's bottom and towards the first of the flying horses. Meanwhile, he was preparing himself for what he had to do, making moral arguments that were discarded almost as soon as he heard them.

Harry wouldn't like this.

But he wasn't doing anything to stop this.

It's not really a Gryffindor or a Light thing to do.

But Sirius was a Light-Declared wizard and a Gryffindor, and he did it, and I don't think the Light rejected him for it.

People might hate you for this.

I don't care.

Connor felt his stubbornness accrue, and then he was rising past the first of the winged horses to get a good look at the wizards on their backs. They all wore earplugs. Connor snorted. He wasn't surprised.

He struck with compulsion like a whip, reaching out and coiling it around the first of the Death Eaters' minds. He felt surprise, and shock, and instinctive struggle, but Sirius—no, Voldemort—had taught him how to handle this when they were practicing with rabbits and rats. Connor brought his own will down like a smoothing hand, and the rippled blanket of the other wizard's mind gradually relaxed into a smooth, quiescent mass, ready to fold or twist the way he wanted it to.

Loosen the chains, Connor thought, pouring all his will into the command. Drop the tank.

The nearest wizard turned his attention to the side of his mount's saddle. Connor turned and caught the next wizard in his net, and smoothed out the rebellion, and gave the same command. The wizards and witches still in the saddle watched with growing bewilderment as their companions obeyed some unknown impulse, but it never had a chance to grow beyond bewilderment to firing curses to stop them. Connor seized them before they could get that far, overrode their wills, and demanded that they listen, too. And the further he went, the easier it was. The last few victims were almost

salivating at the chance, as if they thought that this couldn't be evil or contrary to their Lord's commands if everyone else was doing it.

Connor rode his Nimbus up above the tank and hovered there, sneaking glances in the direction of the hovering Voldemort and Harry. He had a bad taste in his mouth, but he kept the compulsion curled near the front of his mind, ready to unleash and inflict trouble if Voldemort noticed anything and interfered.

He never did. Connor turned back as the chains let go with a clinking rush and the tank with its sirens began to plunge towards the ground.

Only then did he realize that perhaps he should have given someone on the ground advance warning against the approach of so much glass and water.

Snape had seen it coming. From the moment that the odd, jerky movements of the Dark Lord's minions in the saddles of the flying horses caught his attention, he had been prepared for it.

Merlin knows how Harry did it, but there it is, he thought, with a flash of pride. Even when he appears helpless, floating in front of Voldemort as if there is nothing he can do, he reaches out and convinces his enemies to help him.

He began chanting the strongest Shield Charms he knew, linking them together as he had observed one could do in Harry's mind, building wards against the approach of the tank. He put them a good distance behind both his prisoners and the sluggishly crawling people still under the sirens' influence. Then he forced himself to turn back to the victims now clawing mindlessly at the castle's walls. The wards were down, faltering, as the sirens probably exerted their influence on the people inside Hogwarts to open the doors to the intruders. Snape had to prevent that from happening, and that meant the wards he had woven behind them would have to be enough.

He heard a snap like the breaking of the world, and turned in time to see the tank falling.

It hit the ground like a windstorm, and Snape fell to his knees. He heard the songs change to shrieks in the moment before he tightened his Occlumency walls again, refusing to let himself listen to the music as it really was. Then the glass cracked up the sides, and crazed, and the water plunged out, turning the field to mud. The sirens were left writhing, most bleeding, in the wreckage of what remained. Snape thought they were still trying to sing in the moments before the dead Death Eaters he had noticed here and there from the corner of his eye rushed upon them and reached out, strangling their slender throats.

And all the singing stopped.

Shouts of dizzy bewilderment popped up across the field as people on both sides of the battle recovered their minds. Hogwarts's wards sprang to life, strong and glittering.

Snape, surveying the castle in satisfaction before he moved to unbind their fighters, did think he saw one figure in a cloak staggering along an upper battlement, but dismissed his automatic concern. Whoever it was, and whatever the sirens had been trying to compel him to do—jump, open the wards, lower a rope to help the Death Eaters up the walls and into the castle—he wouldn't do it now.

The crash and splash of the tank jarred Voldemort's attention away from Draco and Harry, for just one moment. His snake pivoted to stare, taking his eyes away with it and aiming them in one direction only.

Harry moved.

He'd been so afraid to use the magic he contained before, for fear of only making the situation worse; if he jarred or jolted the dragon, then it could drop Draco. Besides, Voldemort was able to feel what he was doing before he did it, and could block it or wound Draco permanently. But he had to do something now, and so he did, unwinding the magic he'd collected and hurling it forward in great whips.

One twisted around the dragon's jaws, holding its head in place, and the other grabbed Draco and tugged him forward. Harry held his breath as Draco's scalp just barely scraped under the bone teeth, and

then he swung crazily out into midair, dangling from nothing but Harry's will and magic. Harry hastily reeled his boyfriend in towards him. He could hear Draco, awakened from the daze of the sirens' songs, cursing him and Voldemort and the world in general, but he didn't let it distract him. Voldemort was screaming and hurling magic at him, and Harry had to open up the absorbere tunnel again to eat it.

The whip at last swung Draco up on the iron thestral behind him, and then he was clutching Harry's back and babbling about the pain on the side of his head. Harry nodded absently to show that he was listening, and reached back to brush his hand against Draco's waist. Draco squawked.

"If you'd just listen to me, Harry, and realize that—" he began.

"Do you have the knife?" Harry asked.

Draco sighed and shifted so that the hilt of the knife Adalrico Bulstrode had given Harry came in contact with his seeking hand. Harry nodded his thanks and whipped the blade out, draining magic into it with a sense of relief. The knife was far more magical than the stones, and could swallow most of what Harry was pushing through himself, though if Voldemort kept throwing power like that, heedless of where it went in his rage, it wouldn't be long before this receptacle, too, was full.

"Are we ready?" Draco leaned forward to whisper in his ear.

"I think we are," Harry replied. "This is almost as much magic as I can take, and we need—"

A long, tearing scream claimed their attention—everyone's attention. Harry turned his head, at the same time as Voldemort turned his, or his snake's, and stared at the North Tower.

A single figure was perched there. Its cloak streamed behind it, and from here, Harry could smell smoke and fire. Acies, he thought, full of wonder and unease. What is this? Why has she come out on the battlefield? I thought she wasn't going to fight because of what the songs of the Light and the Dark might do to her.

And then he remembered that there had been even more music than that on the battlefield—the sirens' songs. The air had been full of song. And the dragons were called the Singers.

Harry knew then what was coming.

He kicked the iron thestral into a downward swoop, shouting. Snape looked up at him, and Harry shouted again, invoking *Sonus* on his voice. "Get everyone inside! Now!" He was weaving a ward as he spoke—easy, since he was practically leaking magic—a half-circle of white light and phoenix fire around Hogwarts. He didn't know if it was going to be strong enough. He hammered protection against fire into it as hard as he could, and still he did not know if it was going to be enough.

He completed the first half-turn in the making of the ward, feeling how hard Draco's hands clutched at his waist, and as he wheeled, he caught a glimpse of Acies.

Her cloak had flown off. Immense shadows projected above her back, shifting and billowing lazily. Wings, Harry realized, when they turned to the side and caught the light of the storm overhead. Wings larger than those belonging to any dragon he had ever seen.

Acies's body tore open, and her dragon shredded its way free.

Harry had never seen anything like it. Coil after coil, yard after yard, of body unfolded and went on unfolding, overflowing the North Tower—all of it clad in red-gold scales, like blood lit by phoenix fire. The sense of magic and immense strength, the magic it would take simply to support that enormous body and to fly, lapped the battlefield like a second storm. Harry saw the great head twisting, the golden eyes opening, and even from that far away he staggered when he caught a mere glimpse of those eyes. They led into a mind like the sea in storm, alive with wildness. He might tangle with a dragon like that, but he would not win.

This was not one of the living species of dragon, he realized, as she reared on the Tower and opened her wings to their fullest extent,

making a darkness under the day. This was a dragon like the one whose skeleton slept on the Isle of Man, making the great hall where the Opallines lived. This was the dragon that had faced St. George, the dragon that wizards had supposedly invented the Killing Curse to kill, the dragon Harry had been interested in enough after the Isle of Man to look up briefly—the British Red-Gold. Extinct for a thousand years and more, and now a living one spread her wings and roared her defiance at the sun.

Harry could hear nothing of Acies in that cry.

Remember me, she had asked of him, when there is nothing human left of me.

The dragon swung her head slowly from side to side. It looked like doom on patrol. Harry caught a glimpse of the stone crumbling beneath her weight, and knew she might bring down the North Tower. He wondered if he would have to attract her attention so that she would fly from Hogwarts before that happened.

Then someone else attracted her attention. One of Voldemort's Death Eaters, recovered from the sirens' songs and staggering about outside Harry's protective ward, raised his wand and cast Avada Kedavra at her.

The curse fell far short, fizzling out before it ever reached the Tower. Harry thought there was too much fear behind it and not enough hatred. But it got the dragon's attention.

She opened her mouth, and she breathed.

Fire charged up her throat like a dozen Hogwarts Express trains and slammed into the ground hard enough to make the castle lurch. The wizard who'd cast the Killing Curse didn't have time to scream before the blast of brilliant white heat overwhelmed him. Harry recalled Paton Opalline saying that a Red-Gold's fire could vaporize, and so it certainly seemed to. The fire leaped once, like a ball of the sun-liquid that Harry had called on to melt Voldemort's diamond-shards, and then slammed into Harry's ward.

He could feel it melting. Nothing wizard-made had had to contend with flame like this in so long that they no longer knew how to do it. The ward was crumbling, and would lose its strength in a moment.

Harry made a decision he knew he would regret. He snapped his ward backwards, exposing the Death Eaters who still lived and who had either separated themselves to the side or been separated by Snape, and wrapped it tight around the students and his allies who were still outside the castle.

The fire roared. Harry heard no cries. The white mass wavered on for a few more feet, then settled to the ground and began to burn out a charred crater. The Death Eaters were gone. They would be less than bones, Harry knew, less than ash. It was a quick death, but a death of immense pain, contracted into a few moments.

Harry fought not to be sick. He felt Draco's hands clutch at his waist, and the iron spikes curl around his legs, both holding him on the thestral's back. He looked up at the dragon just as she lazily spread her wings and soared into the air. Trees in the Forbidden Forest bowed to the ground in the wake of her rising. For a moment she hung there, blazing with such magic that Harry shivered.

He thought of trying to stop her. Then she turned her head again, as if she had heard the wish, and the eye swept across and staggered him, and Harry knew he could not. He could not reach a mind that wild, and if he tried to cage her, she would surely react to the binding with another string of flame. He had no faith in himself to withstand anything stronger than that first lazy blast, nor to outfly the fire.

He had to watch as she turned and swirled up into the gold of the sky, turning almost golden herself as she reached it, and then parting the storm and vanishing into it. Harry shook his head dazedly. Acies is gone. What remains is—undoubtedly a problem I will need to deal with later.

But he had wasted too much time already in indecision. He took a deep breath, and forced himself to commit to the course that would leave Voldemort too broken to raise a second army of Death Eaters. He tightened the ward around the students and adults as they

retreated into Hogwarts, checked for a moment to make sure the fire was burning where it was and was already the recipient of water spells from behind Hogwarts's own wards, and then faced Voldemort.

He had anticipated having to taunt the Dark Lord into following him. That was not the case, he saw, as that rage-filled face turned towards him. He merely had to laugh, and he could practically feel Voldemort reaching certain conclusions. The dragon had been planned, he would think, and Harry had destroyed all his Death Eaters.

His flesh-dragon flung the iron thestral away like a toy, and began to scull steadily towards them.

"Hang on," Harry muttered to Draco, using his hand to push the Midsummer knife into a robe pocket and feel the stones. Yes, he had them all, glowing with warmth, and the knife beside them, and Draco at his back. Though originally they'd planned to fly on separate thestrals, perhaps this was better. This meant that Voldemort didn't have a chance to catch Draco and hold him hostage on the way there.

"I'm ready," Draco said, his voice reflecting none of the pain and fear Harry knew he must be feeling. His hands tightened on Harry's waist like claws.

Harry nodded, and then kicked the thestral and turned it. A map of the country unrolled in his mind, and the thestral responded obediently, flowing south faster than the flesh-dragon could fly, but never so fast as to get too far ahead of Voldemort and lose his interest. The whole point was to lure Voldemort, make him think he could win, as neither Apparating nor Portkeying would have done.

And on and on they went, aiming straight for London.

Chapter Ninety-Three: Many-Legged

Harry wondered how the Obliviators would conceal this one.

The iron thestral flew south with steady wingbeats, now and then hiding behind a cloud when Harry thought they could get away with it, now and then dropping back so as to almost let Voldemort's flesh-dragon close its teeth on its tail. Sometimes they were high enough to be sure most Muggles wouldn't see them, but not often. Harry wondered what kind of tales would follow them, and whether Scrimgeour would be angry with him for forcing the Ministry to cover up a flight that he wouldn't have wanted happening in the first place.

If I wonder about that, he admitted to himself, I can keep from wondering if this plan is actually going to work.

During the periods when the thestral pulled ahead of the flesh-dragon, he worked grimly, emptying himself of as much absorbed magic as possible and tucking it into the Midsummer knife and the gaps in the stones. It had been essential that he gather as much power as he could. Now that he had it, it was essential that he not be carrying it when they arrived at their destination.

"Do you still think you can possess him?" he asked Draco over his shoulder, as he pressed another smooth fold of power into the blade of Light. The knife accepted it with a purr. Harry thought it helped that they were riding through the anniversary of the long-ago day when it had been forged.

Draco visibly shuddered behind him; Harry could feel the tremors through the hands that gripped his waist. He let his own hand fall, caressing Draco's fingers and wrist. "It's all right if you can't," he said quietly. "Tell me. It only needs to be for a few minutes, but you can possess the knife, as we agreed. I'm going to leave it with you anyway."

"I'm not—that is, I think I can do it," said Draco, his voice firming. They ducked around a cloud, and then rose up into a clear blue sky. They'd left the storm of Light behind when they left Hogwarts, and now Harry thought they were somewhere just south of the Scottish

border. "But I'm worried about the other parts of it. What happens if you get consumed?"

"That's why I'm shifting the magic I hold," said Harry. "Otherwise, I'd be in incredible danger when that thing came out. But it goes for the strongest target, and Voldemort is the strongest target—or he will be once I finish shifting all this magic." He was almost finished, he thought. He'd pulled back to his ordinary magical core, and that way he was less strong than Voldemort was.

"Do you think he'll really follow us into what he has to know is a trap?" Draco asked, as they hurtled around a looming cloud-mountain in front of them. They'd already gone through a few clouds that big, and both Draco and Harry had found it unpleasantly cold and hard to breathe. "He'll have to suspect when we reach it."

Harry twisted around so that Draco could see his grim smile. "And that's where you come in," he murmured. "That's the second reason I need you to possess him, so that he doesn't just Apparate back out. I think I've made him too angry to consider it, but I've been wrong on Voldemort's psychology before. When and if he starts suspecting, you'll be there to give him something else to think about."

Draco shut his eyes and leaned his head on Harry's shoulder. Harry turned back forward just as a blast of the flesh-dragon's oily black breath curled around them and began stinging his eyes and nose again.

Draco coughed, then shrieked in pain. Harry didn't want to think about why, and anyway, he couldn't see the cause in the choking murk. He squeezed Draco's hand on his waist by way of reassurance, ground the stump of his left wrist into Draco's other hand, and urged the thestral up until they cleared the fog.

He turned around to check on Draco, and realized that the flesh-dragon's breath must have stung the wound on the side of Draco's face and neck, the one carved by its teeth. Draco had his eyes closed and was sweating, and the wound had turned a nasty purple color all around its edges and opened again. Harry grimaced. He'd already

tried to heal the injury, and it refused to obey the basic healing spells he knew.

Maybe I can ease the pain, though.

He laid his hand on Draco's cheek and murmured, "Dolor haurio."

Draco's face eased, cautiously, as though he didn't trust the relief creeping through him. Harry grunted as the painful sensations flowed into him, instead. He accepted them, though; he'd long been used to more severe agony, and at least it didn't open a wound on his face to match Draco's. He was going to need all the speed he possessed when they got to their destination, so he didn't want to be slowed by slipping on blood. He faced forward again and continued flying.

"Thank you," Draco whispered.

"You're welcome," Harry whispered back, even though he didn't think anyone could hear them. A glance over his shoulder revealed the flesh-dragon had fallen behind again. Voldemort was snarling and lashing one hand up and down on its shoulder, as though he wanted to coax more speed from it but was currently unable to do so.

"When we get through this," Draco said, "I do want to go to the Sanctuary. I want to do it as soon as possible. I realize there are details to be settled and deaths to arrange, but Merlin, Harry, I want peace and comfort. I want a period of time when I know that you're not going to die and I'm not going to, either." One of his hands found its way to Harry's chest and urged him back until he lay with his head on Draco's shoulder. "I want to celebrate our next joining ritual on your birthday in style," he murmured, and gently nuzzled the side of Harry's neck.

Harry gave a breathless little laugh, and urged the thestral to fly higher and faster. "That you can think about that when we're in the middle of a flight away from the Dark Lord, Draco, and hurtling towards a trap that you admit you're not sure will work any more than I am..." He shook his head.

"Why?" Draco insisted. "What's wrong with it?"

“There’s nothing wrong with it,” Harry said. “I didn’t bring it up to say there was. It just says wonderful things about you. And probably painful things, but I am not about to mention the painful things when we’re on the back of a flying beast a thousand feet in the air and you’ve already admitted you’re nervous.”

Draco’s arms locked around his waist again, this time with less of the painful, frenzied clutch they’d had when they left the battlefield and with more of a tight hold that said he couldn’t dream of letting Harry go. He let his chin fall forward until his head rested on Harry’s in turn, and sighed.

Harry continued steering the thestral south, with a deeply absurd sense of, It will be all right. It really will.

Harry felt the tension of the wards even before they arrived, when London was only a distant smear on the horizon. They asked him, in all but a human voice, whether he was sure he wanted to go through with this.

I am, said Harry, and reached for the commanding voice he had learned, of necessity, when dealing with the Black wards and the Black artifacts. Fall. Let us through when we come.

The wards acquiesced. That was the wrong word, really, Harry thought, as he dipped the thestral so that Voldemort’s dragon couldn’t breathe another cloud of choking murk on them. After all, the wards weren’t really intelligent enough to argue with him, or hold a conversation with him. Nonetheless, there had been doubt, and now there was none. It was extremely hard to explain to anyone who wasn’t actually linked to wards.

He wondered idly if Draco felt the same way—or did the responsibility for the wards around Malfoy Manor still fall so much on his father that he hadn’t ever talked with them the way that Harry had with the Black ones?

“Harry, he’s coming!”

Harry felt all his muscles tense, and he looked over his shoulder not for confirmation—he trusted Draco—but because he wanted to see the angle Voldemort was approaching from. There had always been the possibility that he would attack before they reached their destination and their trap, though Harry had been more worried about him turning back.

The flesh-dragon was picking up speed again, half-melted wings flopping desperately in the air. Voldemort's snake wrapped around his waist as the dragon came closer and closer, swaying so that Voldemort could see them. Harry growled under his breath. It might be a good thing to destroy that snake, but then Voldemort would withdraw entirely from the battle. He had to keep his enemy angry, not panicked.

And he had to survive the flight until they could get to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place.

Harry clenched his knees on the thestral and waited for the dragon's next attack—or Voldemort's. From the way he was holding his wand, he had given up on commanding his beast to use its reeking breath. A spell was the more likely thing. Harry cranked up his awareness, opened his mind to his instincts the way Moody was always insisting they do in battle, and practically held his breath as he waited.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Harry heard the first syllables, and was already turning the thestral. No shield or barrier could block the Killing Curse; Moody had repeated that hundreds of times to the dueling club students, never mind that many of them had already heard of it from Mulciber disguised as him in their Defense Against the Dark Arts classes last year. He hadn't wanted any foolish heroics, any attempts to charge down a dragon's maw when the dragon was spitting that spell at them.

The beam of green light traveled far above the thestral as they dropped. Harry grimaced as he saw Muggle buildings loom sharply into view. Perhaps Voldemort was trying to chase them into the sight of Muggles—though Harry couldn't imagine what he would want to accomplish with that.

Speaking of which, I can at least help the Ministry, he thought, and wrapped a Disillusionment Charm around himself, Draco, and the thestral. Voldemort could still track them easily, by the pull of Harry's gathered magic if nothing else, but the Muggles shouldn't see them now.

When he looked back, Voldemort had taken something like the same tactic, as the outline of the flesh-dragon had faded to a shadow. Harry smirked. He doesn't really want Muggles seeing him yet, no matter what he claims. Taking over their world and never fearing what they could do to a wizard, my arse.

Harry kept an eye on him as the thestral dodged and twisted. He hadn't bothered with the Disillusionment Charm before because they'd passed so rapidly over the Muggles' heads, and he hadn't been sure, then, that Voldemort wouldn't abandon the chase and turn back to plague his allies. But he was sure now. Oh, he was sure. A second Killing Curse a few minutes later confirmed it.

"Harry?" Draco asked, when they'd dived so that the Killing Curse had no chance of touching them, and then rose again.

"Hmmm?" Harry asked. He was leaning forward. He'd memorized the map between Grimmauld Place and Hogwarts carefully, and he knew the thestral was flying in that direction, but it might still be possible to miss the house. They were going so fast that they might hurtle over it, and the Disillusionment Charm had put a misty barrier between them and the world.

"You really aren't frightened, are you?"

Harry glanced back at him in curiosity. "Bloody terrified," he said simply. "Or I will be, once this is finished." He shook his head, remembering the fear that had gripped him when Voldemort held Draco hostage. Perhaps I used up most of my terror then. "It might not work, and then we'll have Voldemort in a house full of dangerous Dark artifacts and all this captured magic. That would be terrifying for any wizard. But I think it is going to work."

“Why?” Draco’s whispered word brushed Harry’s ear like a gnat’s wings.

“Because I have faith in you, and faith in myself, and even faith in the monster we need to let loose to make this work,” said Harry simply, and brushed Draco’s hand with his own again, and then looked down sharply as a familiar, looming shape made itself known. Down! He urged the thestral on with his mental voice and his knees, and the thestral dived.

Harry floated the stones and the Midsummer knife out of his robe pockets with a Levitation Charm as they fell, and tucked them firmly into Draco’s. He had to go into the house with only his own magic about him. Voldemort absolutely must be the strongest wizard when they arrived. He told himself that again and again, to keep from automatically reaching for that drained magic and using it to protect himself.

When they flew through the downed wards and he felt the singing begin, he didn’t try to fight it, either. He bowed his head and murmured to Draco while he still had enough self-control left, “You know what to do.”

Draco squeezed his elbow to the point of pain, but said nothing. Harry took that as a yes.

The thestral landed on the walk in front of Number Twelve Grimmauld Place with a grinding of iron hooves. Harry launched himself off its back and ran madly at the door, Draco right behind him. If Voldemort caught them before they could reach their proper places, there would be bugger all they could do about it.

The door burst open in front of Harry, as if sensing his urgency, and he and Draco parted at the foot of the stairs, Draco flying towards the room where he’d carved his rune circle over the Easter holidays, and Harry running like mad towards the door from behind which the tempting song curled. He could hear legs dancing, and a voice like many voices murmuring, Let me out. Let me out. I must be free. Vates, vates, let me out.

It was practically a relief to give in to that song, to lay his hand on the door Canopus Black had covered with warding spells and to blast Dark magic, the only kind that would work, through them.

Draco slid into his rune circle with a gasp, and, reaching out, drew the Midsummer knife to slit a tiny cut on his finger. Then he squeezed with rough pinches at his finger as he held it above the appropriate rune, eyes on the door all the while. He could hear the grating sound as the flesh-dragon landed, and knew Voldemort would be coming through the front door in a moment, clad in power. Fall, you stupid drop of blood. Why in the world is this taking so long to fall?

The drop of blood did fall, at last, and land on the rune Draco needed it to land on. The circle flared with dazzling power around him, sealing itself. Draco sat back, panting, and then flung his mind outward, seeking the core of Voldemort's mind.

There it was, before him, all blazing, rotting foulness. Draco would have hesitated to dive into it, but he knew that he absolutely had to. Voldemort could not go up the stairs and find Harry before Harry finished releasing whatever the singing beast was.

It was a mad plan, but someone had to help Harry do it and not die.

Draco took a deep breath and leaped through Voldemort's barriers, possessing him.

A locking spell faded away. Harry smiled. He was very nearly one with the song now, which thrummed in his brain like strings of silver given a voice, and was finally able to say something other than the banal pleas for freedom it had been giving for so long.

Thank you. You will not regret this. I am not of this world. We are not of this world. We will show you such things as you have never seen, such wonders as wizardkind never tells of. Only open the door, and let us show you...

Harry thought that was a good thing, a good idea. He knew he had fallen into compulsion—knew it and rejoiced in it. He was so tired.

The revelation he'd had on the field when Voldemort took Draco hostage was one he would rather not have had, and had raised questions he would rather not answer. He would have liked nothing so much as to collapse and let others take over his life for a while, normal people who knew better than he did, and here was someone who would do it for him, if he would only listen to the song.

I can have my free will back when I want, can't I? he asked the creature, and it sang to reassure him.

Of course, vates. Would we compel someone who is dedicated to free will forever? No. Only let us go, and you will see the extent of our compulsion. There is a meal waiting for us downstairs, a powerful wizard. That is wonderful. That is exactly what we wanted. We will go free, and eat, and then I will come back upstairs and teach you what compulsion and free will mean.

Harry smiled, and closed his eyes, and another locking spell faded from the door. The many legs danced in anticipation.

Draco realized almost at once that possessing Voldemort was going to be different from possessing either Dumbledore or Snape. Yes, both of them had been powerful wizards, and both had been Legilimens.

Neither had had, as Draco was quickly discovering Voldemort did, the ability to possess someone back.

The moment Voldemort felt the intrusion to his mind, he tried to grasp and read the thoughts of the intruder. Draco slipped free of the hold and plunged further into the reeking insanity of the Dark Lord's thoughts. It felt worse than the choking cloud of breath he'd experienced from the flesh-dragon. He had to pause, gasping, and Voldemort caught up with him.

For a moment, he felt his own will melting, or being shoved away into a tiny corner of his mind. For a moment, he felt his own body in the rune circle, horribly present around him when it shouldn't be, lifting a hand as if he would smudge the runes and let himself out—and let Voldemort have access to the stones and the Midsummer knife that he carried, filled with the magic Harry had stolen.

No. I won't let that happen. Draco was already ashamed enough of how Voldemort had managed to use him against Harry on the battlefield, and how he had gone tamely along with it because he'd surrendered to the sirens' compulsion. That wouldn't happen again. He imagined himself as oiled snake, oiled flesh, oiled thoughts, and shoved away from his body again. He melted through Voldemort's grasp and roiled through the thoughts he carried far from the surface, seeking one that would let him have a solid grip.

Voldemort roared and dived after him. Draco could read enough of his mind now to know that he thought Draco was searching for one specific bit of information, the one that would tell Harry why Voldemort was immortal. He really, really didn't want Draco to find that information.

Well, then let's look for it, shall we? It would be better than Voldemort realizing what Draco was really doing: holding him here until the beast, the better distraction, could come for him.

Draco lunged in and out of Voldemort's thoughts, pretending he knew where he was going, and all the while uttering random words. When he did, they bounced back to him like echoes off those memories that contained their concepts. Normally, Draco could simply see anything in a victim's mind he wanted, but given Voldemort's inherent resistance to possession, he had to use this method instead and hope he stumbled on something worth reading. Heart, mind, love, darkness, sun, immortality, death, necromancy, ghosts, corpses, Inferi, soul—

The shriek Voldemort gave when he heard Draco saying "soul" was devastating. And then the claws of his mind reached down and hooked into Draco, making him scream in pain. It was worse than when he'd awakened after the dream Harry had created to trap the Dark Lord with the false prophecy.

Voldemort turned him over. In a moment, Draco knew, he would read everything, and know what Harry was doing, what his plans were, and even that the prophecy that had lured him to Hogwarts on Midsummer Day had been false.

In desperation, Draco did the only thing he could do. He taunted, We already know all about you and your soul, you bloody arse, and Harry is going to do something about it in a moment.

There was a breathless pause, a shocked moment before the storm, and then Voldemort hurt him.

Harry released the last locking spell. The door in front of him looked ordinary now, a wavering wooden panel, hardly fit to contain a creature of the magnificence that waited behind it.

In the creature's excitement at being free, it ceased to sing for a moment.

And then Harry recovered his will, and knew what was going on, and rolled out of the way.

The wooden door bulged and tore open down the middle. The creature poured into the world beyond like an exultant string of shit; so Harry felt the compulsion that came with it, now that he was awake. Not silver strings, but the trembling voice of a thousand screaming and murdered insects, he thought, shivering as he leaned against the wall and watched the creature heading for the stairs.

It did indeed have many legs, all attached to a segmented dark green body like beads of metal. It resembled a centipede as much as it resembled anything—if centipedes had no head, and many faces embedded in their sides, shielded and then revealed again by fluttering, white, wing-like discs. The faces were all human, all distorted, and all screaming with wide and yawning mouths. The mingled voices appeared and disappeared again depending on whether the wings were obscuring their faces or not. Harry shuddered as he thought of what the faces probably were: the remains of the creature's previous victims.

His speculation, or what he remembered based on what Narcissa had told him about the creature, was right. It ignored him and headed downstairs. It was aiming to consume Voldemort, who was the

strongest wizard in the house now that Harry had shed the magic he'd gathered.

Harry sprang to his feet, waited until the last green bead was out of sight, and then ran after it. He needed to be not far behind the creature if he wanted to defang Voldemort. Because even that creature, in the end, was not his ultimate weapon against his enemy; it was only a distraction, to hold Voldemort still while Harry rendered the Dark Lord impotent. He might have depended on Draco alone, but he didn't think Draco could hold Voldemort as long as the creature would.

He hoped, as he pounded down the stairs and caught sight of the creature's last pair of legs just turning the corner, that Draco had managed to hold Voldemort for as long as it had taken him to free the creature.

Draco had never hurt so much.

Everywhere he turned, everywhere he looked, there was pain. He tried to reach out and grasp Voldemort's mind or magic, but every thought turned knife-edged and flung him away. He was bleeding, he knew he was, shedding memories or opening wounds in his mind. And this time, he didn't think they would be so easy to repair as they had been after Harry's dream. Snape wasn't here to heal them, anyway.

Worse, Voldemort was tainting him, bleeding himself into Draco in some way that Draco didn't understand. Or maybe that was just what possession by the Dark Lord felt like. Draco shuddered convulsively as he thought about that, and heard Voldemort chuckle, low, in his ear.

Do you like this, little one? Voldemort asked, in a voice that echoed from everywhere Draco turned, and sparked more and more pain. You were so eager to possess me. Do you not like being in the confines of another mind?

Draco gasped, and then cried out. And then he knew he was back in his body, in the rune circle, and had been forced out of Voldemort's mind completely.

The Dark Lord stood in front of him, his flesh-snake wrapped around his neck, staring at Draco with crimson eyes. It was the most terrifying thing Draco had seen, not least because he could feel the power pounding around Voldemort. He crouched very still, a mouse before the hawk that had already noticed it.

"Little one, little one, little one," Voldemort whispered. "At my mercy, again, and I need no sirens or dragon this time. And I need no other weapon to torment my heir, or press a blade against his throat. He will swear to help me conquer the wizarding and Muggle worlds, or kill himself slowly, by torture, if that is what it takes for you to be free of me."

Draco closed his eyes, his stomach and his brain swimming. He knew he was helpless. His head hurt so badly that he didn't dare attempt possession, and he had no other weapon that could defeat the Dark Lord, or allow them to contend as equals.

"You will begin," Voldemort said, in a gentle, inexorable voice, "by spilling your blood on the rune circle, and opening it, and then tossing those stones and that intriguing knife to me."

Draco didn't see that he had a choice. When he tried to gather himself to defy Voldemort, the Dark Lord twitched one pale hand, and Draco fell with a shriek as a shock of pain coursed through him. And he could not die. That would kill Harry more thoroughly than to see him as Voldemort's victim and prisoner. He could only try to delay.

Moving as slowly as he could, pretending he was too afraid to move faster—which was very nearly true—he reached into his robe pocket and scooped up one of the stones. Then he dropped it because his hand was shaking. Voldemort laughed, sounding more amused than angered.

Then he turned his head, and his snake pivoted to face the room's door and hissed.

Draco looked up as he heard the tap of multiple feet and the screams. Then he tensed as the creature came hurtling around the corner and headed straight for Voldemort.

And the Dark Lord didn't run, instead staring at the creature as if it were the most fascinating thing he had ever seen. Then it was on him, grabbing him around the waist with two of its legs and drawing him close, pressing his face against what Draco soon saw was one of the many, many mouths in its side. Its body whipped around him like a necklace as he went, unresisting, and more mouths, revealed by those fluttering wings, closed on Voldemort and began to feast—on his magic, Draco thought.

Harry slid around the corner of the doorway, panting. Draco, his hands now as shaky with relief as they'd been with fear, took a moment to squeeze the cut on his finger and coax another drop of blood onto the rune circle, opening it and dropping the protection it had afforded him—and allowing physical objects to cross the circle. Harry held out his own hand, and the stones and the Midsummer knife zipped out of Draco's robe pockets and across the boundary to land in his palm with a smack.

Harry slipped the stones into his robe and spent a moment surveying Draco as he clutched the knife. Draco tried to smile back, but he knew he hadn't fooled Harry. He didn't know how Harry could ignore the sucking beast and its victim to focus on him, but he did.

"Are you going to be able to do this?" Harry asked quietly.

"Yes," Draco whispered. Harry stared. Draco forced himself to cough and repeat it more loudly. "Yes, Harry, I am. I can do this. I can't Apparate, so I've got to possess it. I will."

And Harry bowed his head, accepting that with the faith he had in him, and whirled to face Voldemort, holding the Midsummer knife high. It shimmered in the sunlight coming in through the one window. Draco shuddered. The knife had been forged from the last ray of sunshine on a Midsummer day, Harry had told him, and she was full of magic. He supposed it was only right that she should shine.

Harry spent a moment muttering to himself, as if he were counting. Then the beast turned, and Voldemort's foot lashed out of the protective circle of green body.

Harry stabbed down, plunging the Midsummer knife into Voldemort's calf.

Even Draco felt the rush of magic that followed.

Harry rode the rush of magic through the knife, pushing himself forward with his will, using the power he'd stored in the blade to rise through Voldemort's flesh and blood and straight into his magical core. He would never have been able to do this if Voldemort was aware of himself, of course. But he wasn't, caught in the compelling embrace of the beast, and since the creature was ignoring Harry for the sake of the much tastier meal he'd brought it, he was free of its song.

He dug into Voldemort's magical core, and felt a few feeble defenses shatter before him. Then he spoke/willed the spell he'd chosen into existence, the spell he'd had the inspiration to use when he saw Augustus Starrise and Adalrico Bulstrode dancing at the spring equinox.

"Ulcer regis piscatori!"

The Fisher King Curse created the wound that could not be healed except by the caster, just as it had when Augustus used it on Adalrico—but instead of opening it on Voldemort's ankle, Harry opened it in his magical core. At once he began to spew power, losing it like blood.

The wound would continue to exist until Harry said it should not. Voldemort could still swallow magic—Harry knew of no way to take the absorbere gift, an innate power, away—but it would run out of him again as fast as water pouring into a sieve. Harry knew it would force Voldemort to retreat, to hide until he acquired some means of defending himself.

Voldemort screamed. The pain, and the drain of the power, had awakened him from the beast's spell. For a moment, he wavered on the brink of giving in to the compulsion again, but then he gathered himself up and Apparated, already barely able to do even that much. Harry, yanking the Midsummer knife and his own consciousness out of his victim in the moment before the Apparition happened, couldn't restrain a scream of victory.

And then he had to watch out, as the beast, deprived of its meal, turned to sing to the second strongest wizard in the house.

Chapter Ninety-Four: The Shining Road

Harry could feel the beast drawing in its breath to sing, if it had a breath. He didn't know how long Draco would be able to possess it, and given how wounded he thought Draco was, from the way he held himself, he rather thought they should save that moment of possession for a more opportune time.

Before the creature could start to sing, then, he drew a stone out of his robe pocket and held it up.

The creature gave a sound oddly close to a purr, and the voice Harry remembered from behind the locked door came back. Will you give that to us? We want it. It is beautiful. We are hungry. We want it. The eyes of all the faces were looking at it, Harry saw. The wing-like discs were drawn up so they could see, and they had stopped screaming for now, as if their meal of Voldemort had eased their pain.

Harry, his heart pounding—the creature could start singing again at any moment, after all—said, “I'll give it to you, but not here. This house is stained with the remains of my enemies. It is only fitting that you go and sing in a new place.” With the stone still in his hand, his eyes on the creature, he reached out and pulled at Draco with a gentle Summoning Charm. Draco drifted over to him and settled in the crook of his handless arm. The creature didn't appear to notice. As Narcissa had told him, Harry thought, it was interested only in meals of strong magic. Taking a step backward, Harry continued, “Do you know the Black house Silver-Mirror?”

We do. I do. The nearest face turned to watch the stone, the stretched mouth twitching in yearning.

Harry reached out to the wards on Silver-Mirror and commanded them to fall, now. Luckily, Silver-Mirror was the property that gave him the least trouble. Wayhouse would have been inclined to argue. “Then follow us,” he whispered, and tugged gently on the stones and the Midsummer knife, so that they tingled with magic and shone to the creature's multiple eyes. He bowed his head over Draco's and prepared to Apparate with him to Silver-Mirror.

With his face so close to his boyfriend's ear, he could murmur, and be reasonably sure that the creature wouldn't hear. "When we arrive. Possess it, for one moment. Keep its attention. Can you do that?"

Draco said nothing. But a moment later, his hands clasped on Harry's binding arm so hard that they momentarily cut off the flow of blood. Harry nodded in acknowledgment, and then closed his eyes and Apparated.

Side-Along Apparating someone else, especially someone he wanted to be as careful of as possible, hurt. Harry landed on his feet, however, and moved gently back from Draco with the stone in his hand, not allowing himself to think of failure any more than he did when he was chasing the Snitch in a Quidditch game. This was going to work, because it had to work, because it was the plan he had devised and it was going to work. He said so.

The beast appeared, coiled in the entrance hall, beneath the golden pool that slid drops of flame down the chains to the lamps.

Draco leaned forward.

Harry knew the moment when he possessed it, because the creature called out in all its many voices, and he moved.

Draco wanted to do nothing so much as curl up in a corner and go to sleep. His mind hurt, and his head hurt, and his magic hurt. He thought he could still feel the taste of Voldemort's taint in his throat if he spat.

But Harry had asked him to do this, and Draco knew that Harry would not have asked for help unless he truly needed it.

He looked up at the beast and lunged outward, reaching across the gap between them, touching its mind.

It hurt like stretching a cramped muscle hurt, and that was only the use of possession itself. Much worse was trying to grasp a mind so thoroughly alien. Harry had told him that a dragon's mind was alien like a storm, and Dumbledore's had been filled with ideals Draco

found foreign, and Voldemort's had been a seething pit of Dark magic so foul even Draco's father would have refrained from using it.

But at least Dumbledore and Voldemort had been human—or had once been human, in the case of Voldemort. This was not. This never had been. It was not a conglomerate, a patchwork, of its victims' memories, as Draco had assumed it would be. It was—

It was hunger.

Draco moaned as he tried to grasp that incredible drive to eat and eat and eat, to consume and swallow magic until nothing was left, and could not. His stomach was already aching, and he knew that was a bad sign, that he could feel his own body and not the creature's. Hunger puddled in him. He wanted to give up his own magic to allay that yearning, or, more, swallow some of the power Harry had stolen. Why did he have that much? He didn't need that much anyway.

The creature came closer. Draco looked up and found himself staring into one stretched, narrow face embedded in a body segment like a great glass bead. The wing-like projections stretched out, trembling, and sniffed at him. Draco felt the interest and curiosity coursing through him like shards of broken glass.

Interesting, said the creature. You are strong in your possession gift. Perhaps we will eat that.

“Singer!”

And Draco knew that meant Harry was ready, and he could let his hold on the creature's mind loosen, and drop back into his body. He shuddered, wrapping his arms around himself. Merlin, he hurt. Hollowed-out and cold and bleeding and oily and befouled. He bowed his head and hoped that Harry wouldn't ask him to do anything else, because he might do himself permanent damage this time.

Harry had already chosen the one he wanted to use, of course. That had been part of the purpose of planning the way he had, all ahead of time. Draco's rune circle and his decision to surrender to the creature's compulsion long enough to free it and the Midsummer knife had all been part of the plan, and so was this.

He threw a subtle brightening spell at the one of the portraits hanging on the wall that he'd chosen as most useful. Then he had to adopt a suitably befuddled expression, and wrap his Complete Vanishing spell around the stones and the knife so that they would appear not to be there at all, and call, "Singer!"

The creature turned towards him, as much as it could be said to turn towards anything when it didn't have a head. The mouths gaped and stretched at him.

"I dropped the magic!" Harry called, and nodded at the portrait that showed a silver road stretching into the distance. "In there!"

The creature needed no instructions from him. It knew that it could enter the portrait. There did come one dangerous moment when Harry thought it might choose to swallow the picture's magic instead of go through.

Harry used that moment to say, in a voice as seductive as possible, "All of these lead to magical worlds. Imagine the feasts that wait for you there."

Many legs drummed. The creature hurtled forward and at the portrait, unwinding its body from the floor as it went, to half-rear. Harry shuddered as he watched the first beads of the body hit the paint and begin to vanish. It was still probably the ugliest thing he'd ever seen, and he wasn't sure whether the stretched faces or the insect-like legs made it uglier.

The creature hurtled through, at last. Harry took his courage in hand and forced himself to step up to the picture, to look and see what it was doing. It could have been waiting on the other side, ready to eat him.

Instead, he saw the green body rapidly making its way into the distance on the starlight road, a part of the portrait now.

Harry took the frame in his hand and gently turned the painting to face the wall. Regulus had told him that if he did that, no one and nothing who had entered the picture could come through again, and Harry trusted Regulus.

I couldn't trap Voldemort in the pictures, because he knew about them, he thought, as he turned away and let himself relax a little. But the creature wasn't a wizard, and could be tricked.

Draco was sitting on the floor, his arms wrapped around himself and his head bowed until his hair completely hid his face. Harry hurried over to him and embraced him. Draco leaned against him, quaking. Harry wasn't sure if it was from cold or pain or fear.

"What can I do to help?" he whispered, stroking Draco's hair. "Tell me."

"I'm so tired," Draco whispered back, which made Harry add weariness to the list of suspects for the shivering. "I just—I felt Voldemort bleeding into me, mingling with me, almost possessing me in turn. He said that he was going to use me against you. And he hurt me—tore part of my mind, I think. And then possessing the creature taught me what hunger means. And I just want to rest, and I don't know who can heal me. Snape, maybe? Madam Pomfrey? I don't know." He pressed himself against Harry like a young dragon blindly seeking shelter.

Harry told himself that now was not the time for guilt. For one thing, it would keep him from doing what had to be done; for another, Draco had chosen to come with him, chosen to fight, and feeling guilty because he'd got wounded in doing so would diminish his sacrifice. "Do you want to stay here while I go back to Hogwarts and fetch them?" he asked. "Or do you feel as if you can be moved?"

"I can be moved. You have to do what you gathered that magic in the stones and the knife for," Draco said stubbornly, and then his eyes widened as he stared over Harry's shoulder. "Where did they go? You didn't really drop them in the painting and give them up to that creature, did you?"

"No, stupid," Harry muttered, gently scooping Draco up with half his own strength and half Mobilicorpus. "I Vanished them. See?" he added, and removed the Extabesco plene so that Draco could see them. "And of course I'll do what I gathered the magic for, but it doesn't have to be here. It would probably be better done in Hogwarts, anyway, because that's closer to my targets. Or I'll ask Connor if I can use Lux Aeterna. Don't worry about it."

"Of course I'll worry about it, Harry," Draco said, with a faint arrogant tone to his words that did more to reassure Harry than any protests about how well he felt. "Until you do that, then you won't want to go to the Sanctuary, and I want to. We are going there as soon as possible. And you're not going to think of anything besides healing and me, are you?"

"Not in that order," Harry said softly.

Draco stared at him for a moment.

"You don't have any idea how magnificent you were, do you?" Harry shook his head in wonder. "Draco, I couldn't have done this without you. There's no way Voldemort would have held still long enough for me to stab him and inflict that wound on him, or wouldn't have sensed what I was doing at once. You fought beside me, and you were wounded in doing so, and you still managed to perform one last feat of heroics." He wished he could have touched Draco's face, but his hand was caught beneath him, supporting his back, so he settled for ducking his head and rubbing his cheek against Draco's. "You're wonderful, Draco."

"Well, I'm glad you realized that, at least," Draco muttered, and closed his eyes.

"How many Apparitions do you think you can take?" Harry asked, forcing his mind to turn to practical matters. "The iron thestral is surer, but slower, and I want to get you healed as soon as possible."

Draco sucked in his breath. Then he said, "I can—I can take four or five Side-Along Apparitions, I think, Harry. Can you jump the distance between here and Hogwarts in that many?"

Harry smiled in relief. "I certainly can." He firmed his grip on Draco with both his arms and his magic, remembering just in time to float the stones and the Midsummer knife back into his robe pockets. "Hang on," he murmured, and pictured Grimmauld Place, and Apparated.

Harry landed, with Draco firmly in his arms, on the road just outside of Hogwarts. He wasn't sure if McGonagall would have restored the wards that made Apparition impossible on school grounds, and he didn't want to risk bouncing from them and injuring Draco if she had.

It looked as if she had, if the buzz in the air was any indication. Harry nodded to no one in particular and tightened his grip on Draco again. He imagined the wards would inform McGonagall the moment he walked in.

"Just a bit further, Draco," he murmured, and then realized that Draco was unconscious. Well, Side-Along Apparition was unpleasant. Harry told himself it was that and nothing else as he headed up the path towards the gates. He would not waste time in useless worrying. He would do something useful instead, like getting Draco to the people who could heal him.

He came in across the Quidditch Pitch, and had to close his eyes for a moment at the sheer destruction. The ground was churned mud and grass, and covered with blood. The slanting sunlight of early afternoon seemed to have lost its power, and the usual sounds that Harry remembered from Hogwarts at this time last year—birds, creatures' calls from the Forbidden Forest, the high singing of the wind—were gone. All this destruction had happened in no more than a few hours, since the battle had started at dawn.

And there were bodies.

Harry performed a small charm to keep his and Draco's faces clean of the stink as he walked among them. The giants were first, great gray lumps too huge to be real, lying sprawled in the mud with clubs and spears close by their sides. Their flesh smelled cooked more often than not, since they'd been the victims of numerous fire spells.

Harry avoided one with a cracked skull that lay in a pool of its own brains.

Then came the people.

Harry couldn't close his eyes, because he had to pick a steady path for himself that wouldn't jounce Draco. So he moved, and he looked into faces, and he recognized the dead when he could.

There, sprawled in the mud with a broken half of a giant's spear through her, was the body of a golden-haired witch whom Harry thought must be a Gloryflower. Laura would mourn. Not far from her were two Death Eaters who seemed to have died trying to kill each other. Harry was uncertain why, until he realized that one of them had actually died from a Severing Curse through her belly, and had her fingers clamped on the neck of the other. He nodded. She must have been dead, and someone had summoned her back—Pansy? She had fallen now that the battle was over and she had no more vengeance to take.

He passed the remains of the sirens' tank, and had to step more carefully than ever, over bits of broken glass and strangled bodies. He forced himself to meet the sirens' dead eyes, for the most part pools of blue and green with no pupil anymore. He wondered if their pupils disappeared when they died.

He passed a sprawled mess of tendrils, Indigena's plants. And in the middle of them was a small torn shape in black robes that, even now, winds that didn't exist elsewhere tossed about. Harry checked his step, longing to hesitate further. He knew, though the body's head was missing, who it must be.

Pansy.

He couldn't linger, though, not with Draco possibly suffering more and more pain in his arms. Take care of the living first, he heard, as if from a distance, one of his mother's lessons that had not ceased to matter. The dead will take care of themselves.

He turned and went on, and saw Hogwarts's wards shimmering fierce and tight around the castle. The fire Acies had caused was out, though it had burned a crater into the ground which still smoked. A breeze blew the scent of cooked flesh towards Harry. He blanked his mind, hiding the remembrance of the burning Death Eaters in the Occlumency pools, and went on towards the castle.

Flung hands and squashed golden horses and broken weapons and bodies lying motionless and unmarked from the onslaught of Avada Kedavra. Staring eyes and torn robes and footprints carved in mud as if in stone and blood flung like a new constellations. Dead and doomed plants and the tattered remains of Hagrid's hut and a dead centaur with all his legs broken and the distant, trailing sound of a dog barking, which Harry didn't understand.

All of it crashed into him, wounded him in ways that Draco's wounding and his own desperate struggle against Voldemort and even the death of the dozen students by the lake had not. By the time he reached the front doors of Hogwarts, Harry knew that he had to turn Draco over to those who could care for him and then go and do what he'd collected the stolen magic for in the first place. He needed something good to come out of this battle, something more than defeat and death for his enemies. He needed to have an upsurge of life and freedom.

"Harry!"

That was Honoria, running towards him from the doors of the castle. Illusions of lions danced on her shoulders, all of them with paws spread in welcome. Harry summoned a faint smile for her, and evaded her attempt to embrace him, afraid it would make him drop Draco.

"Can you call Madam Pomfrey, Honoria?" he asked quietly. "Draco is wounded, both in body and in mind, and he needs help."

Honoria managed to tame all the impulses that would have probably insisted she joke with him about this, and just nodded. "And how is he wounded?" she asked, as she extended her arms above her head, ready to form into wings.

“He took a wound from a dragon-tooth on the side of his face. He possessed Voldemort until I could stab him and wound his magic, and then he possessed a strange creature, an alien—thing.” Harry still had no name for it. He shook his head. “Tell them to talk to Narcissa Malfoy. She was born Black, and she might know more about the creature than she told me, since it was in the Black house.”

Honorio stared at him for a long moment. Harry wondered impatiently why she wasn’t going, and then she said, “Voldemort’s wounded?”

“Yes. Not dead,” Harry added hastily. He could easily imagine how Honorio’s exuberance could cause her to exaggerate the news, and what kind of consternation it would cause when the Dark Lord turned out to be alive. “But wounded, with a hole in his magical core draining out every attempt he makes to use a spell. I imagine he’ll find something to repair it in time, but he should be quiet for at least the duration of the summer. And all his Death Eaters are dead.”

Honorio murmured, “Thank Merlin.” Then she nodded briskly to Harry. “Bring him towards the hospital wing. I’ll get Madam Pomfrey.” A moment later, the gull climbed above him, towards one of the high windows.

Harry murmured, “*Extabesco plene*,” as he cut a small hole in the wards and moved inside the castle, repairing the hole behind him. He didn’t want anyone else grabbing him and delaying him on the way to the hospital wing. The important thing was getting help for Draco, not—yet—pausing to explain their defeat of Voldemort twenty-two times.

He saw plenty of people in the corridors as he made his way upward, but, of course, none of them sensed him. Most younger students stood in corners murmuring, as if glad that it was over, or else asked older students questions with wide-eyed curiosity. Some of those older students, their limbs in slings and their bodies moving with the tenderness that marked recent experience with healing magic, bragged about their part in the battle; others simply shook their heads and looked away.

Harry saw numerous faces pale and stiff with tears, and knew it was for the casualties. He saw Hawthorn, sitting near the entrance of her guest quarters with her hands over her face, and his heart gave a steady, throbbing ache that struck all through him. He wanted to stop and comfort her, but, once again, he wouldn't get help for Draco that way, and he didn't think any comfort he could give before someone else saw him would ever be enough. He wanted to wait until she could have the time and attention she deserved.

He reached the hospital wing at last, and saw both Snape and Pomfrey waiting beside an empty bed. Harry let the Complete Vanishing Spell go, and saw Snape's gaze lock on him, first, before it moved to Draco.

"He possessed Voldemort," said Harry, before anyone could tell him anything, and laid Draco gently on the bed. "For several minutes, I think. Voldemort possessed him back. It hurt him—mental wounds. And there's the wound on the side of his face that Voldemort's dragon caused." Madam Pomfrey was already running her wand over that injury, muttering under her breath. Harry continued, though now he was growing aware of the stares from other beds and a few people already edging forward to talk to him. "He also possessed a strange creature locked in the Black house, but only for a moment. It looked like a centipede, headless, with the faces of its victims set into its sides, and it ate magic. Contact his mother about that. She might know details that I've forgotten."

"And what about you, young man?" Madam Pomfrey asked, briefly looking up from Draco.

"Not physically wounded," said Harry. "Exhausted, but I'll live." His training once again came in useful as he felt Snape's attempt to reach for him and ducked it. "I have something else to do right now," he added impatiently. "Where's my brother?" Only after he had asked it did he realize that that question could easily have been answered with a "Dead."

"Here, Harry."

Harry turned. Connor was just stepping away from another hospital bed. Harry swallowed as he saw Hermione lying there. He forced himself to bring his eyes back to Connor's face. So many obligations, and he would prioritize and attend to them, but for now, he needed to do this.

"Can you convince the wards at Lux Aeterna to let me in?" he asked.

Connor, his mouth open to, probably, comment on something else entirely, blinked and said, "Of course. Why?"

Harry took one of the stones from his robe pocket, shining with the force of its captured magic, and held it up. "I owe the northern goblins a debt," he said.

Harry appeared easily enough outside Lux Aeterna. He remembered what it looked like; the memories burned all the brighter in his head for the fact that after the one summer he'd spent there, his bond with James had been doomed, and he hadn't known it.

He carefully undid the locking spells on the front door, but relaxed when the wards slid over him, snuffling like dogs, and recognized the feel of someone their master had permitted. They fell before him, and he could step into the grand entrance hall and look up at the ceiling. The windows were flooded with the light of the setting sun. It had taken Harry that much time to convince Snape and Connor and McGonagall and Peter that he couldn't collapse yet, and yes, Draco was wounded but Harry could do nothing to help him right now either, and no, he wasn't going to retreat into a secluded room and cry on someone's shoulder.

Far better than any retreat or seclusion now, which would let him brood on the thought of the deaths he'd caused, was the thought of what light and life and healing he could still bring.

Just to make sure, he did touch the stump of his left wrist and speak to Tybalt first. Tybalt's voice was lazy and self-satisfied, not that the second was unusual. "Yes?"

"You did secure the linchpin?" Tybalt had said that he was on "the brink of success" in his last communication, but refused to say that he was sure his plan was going to work.

"Harry! Yes." Tybalt's voice grew quicker and more eager, and he sounded on the verge of bragging. "Yes, of course I did. I told you I would. My uncle would scold you must severely, you know, for doubting a Starrise."

"Then I ought not to doubt your brother's ability to fight back, either," Harry retorted, but he could feel one tortured knot in him relax. "How did you take the linchpin away?"

"Simple," said Tybalt. "It's actually a good thing that you didn't persuade our families to forsake the notion of common inheritance, Harry, and just tie our assets to one person, the way you persuaded your brother. Then, the linchpin wouldn't have come to me at all unless I killed Pharos. This way, though, I asked the linchpin which it would prefer: a Starrise more in the mode of my uncle, a leader and someone proud who would help restore the fortunes of the family, or a Starrise who was cowardly and a follower and had been so overwhelmed by my uncle that he would never know how to lead on his own."

Harry concealed a chuckle, the first true laughter he'd uttered in more than a day. "And it accepted you?"

"It did." Tybalt's voice soared to a new height of smugness. "My uncle was careful to designate Pharos his legal heir, so that the estate didn't pass to me automatically when he died, but it didn't matter. He forgot that linchpins are concerned more with the fate of the blood family than any one member of it. The wards listened to me, and fastened to me. Because I asked. Augustus never bothered asking if they actually wanted to be bound to Pharos." Tybalt laughed himself. "That's one of the lessons you taught me, Harry. Sometimes all you have to do is ask, and trust in another being's free will, and you'll get what you wanted far more easily than if you tried to compel them. I don't know why there hasn't been a vates before now. You'd think more Lords would have learned compulsion isn't worth it."

Harry shook his head, knowing he was smiling and not trying to stop it. "I don't know if I would frame my principles in quite that way, Tybalt."

"Oh, that's all right," Tybalt said. "You don't have to, because I'll do it for you."

Harry didn't try to resist the uprush of joy in his heart. That was part of the reason he had decided to do this now, after all: so that he would have the strength of some happiness, of some unalloyed triumph, when he had to turn back and face the mixture of triumph and tragedy that Midsummer Day had become. "Thank you, Tybalt," he said. "Doesn't this mean that you're bound to your family, now, and that you'll have to produce an heir?"

"It does," said Tybalt, sounding entirely comfortable. "But it was never my family name that I objected to, Harry. It was my uncle's stiffness and his trying to live in the past and mourn my mother's memory to the exclusion of everything else. And as for heirs, my other uncle, my mother's brother, has plenty of daughters, and one of them, Portia, is already showing signs of being independent and strong enough to lead. John and I have agreed to adopt her."

Harry smiled again. Sometimes, the Light families' insistence on not having magical heirs does make it easier for them to continue their lines. "I wish congratulations and good luck to you both."

"Thank you," said Tybalt. "You're going to proceed now?"

"I am," said Harry quietly.

"Good luck."

"Thank you."

Harry ended the communication spell and turned to his stones and the Midsummer knife. When he called, they began to revolve around him, the Midsummer knife purring and shining as her blade caught the light.

Harry reached out and began to pull the magic he'd gathered back into him. As it came at him, he separated it into two streams. One was the magic purified by his phoenix fire—the magic that had originally come from Dumbledore, and from Voldemort when he'd drained him in the Chamber of Secrets—and the magic purified by the Light when Harry had called on it. The other was the still-tainted magic he'd drawn from the Death Eaters on the battlefield that morning and had had no time to cleanse.

That was all right. For the purpose he had in mind, this tainted magic was perfect.

Harry reached north. He could feel the northern goblins' web, though he could not see it without the special tools that Helcas had shown him—almost two years ago now. The thought saddened him, until he shook his head and forced himself to ignore how much had changed since then.

In front of him was something else, something that had not changed in much too long.

The streams of magic broke through him, charging floods, one clean and one befouled. Harry could feel himself shuddering with many things: weariness, the sheer power of the magic, the temptation to claim it and use it for himself. But all of them faltered before his determination to give the northern goblins the freedom they deserved.

Once, it would have meant sacrificing his own magic to do this. Now, it would mean sacrificing only magic he had acquired for just this purpose.

Since he had to feel out the edges of the web and the linchpins' wards, he paid more attention to his sensation of touch and less to his sight. That meant that when odd images of streams appeared before him, golden and deep green, pouring away from him and to the north, he could ignore them. Visible musical notes thrummed in front of his eyes; he ignored them, too. Sometimes he saw dangling family crests as he identified which linchpin belonged to which wizarding family. That didn't matter. He pushed forward, and at last the linchpins trembled in his hand like a drop of water ready to fall

from a leaf, swollen with power, and the magic played all around him, restless rain waiting to be used.

Harry breathed.

The magic rushed out of him, and twisted, and then separated finally and for good into those two streams. The pure, cleansed one twined around the linchpins. The wards that linked them to the web and the bindings on the goblins turned around in interest. Their owners had already given them permission to look at this magic, and Harry could feel their interest and curiosity growing; it was beautiful magic, vaulting, sunlit, a waterfall or a stream of purity. The wards detached slowly from the earth, and reached out to wrap around the beautiful golden magic.

Harry forced himself to envision how many separate cores of power he would need, several dozen for the several dozen linchpins. Then he broke the golden stream forcefully into many quiet pools, each with a linchpin's wards wrapped around it, rooting in it. They were no longer bound to the web, but to those pools, which, not used for anything else, relaxed and allowed themselves to be used as anchors. The Light nature of the magic blended well with the Light nature of the families' ancient wards, anyway.

At the same time, Harry grasped the goblins' web, which had started to shift and slide and send the land once secured by the linchpins hurtling towards the sea, and slammed the dark green stream of tainted magic into it. These pools, when he broke them off, took the form of false linchpins. The tainted magic did not mind doing that, because subterfuge and deception were often tools of the Dark. In moments, the web was secure, wrapped around and tangled on its new burdens, and never noticing that they were not linchpins.

It was, in fact, so concerned with them that Harry found it easy to reach out and pick up all the trailing strands of the web that were previously connected to the northern goblins, and wind them around the pools of Dark magic instead, letting these strands understand that the pools were Dark. The web had been set by ancient Light wizards to confine creatures they were afraid of and wanted service from. It knew all about confining the Dark, and the descendants of its original

owners had given permission to this wizard to change things around, so everything must be well. It hummed to itself as it clutched the new, Dark “linchpins” a bit tighter.

Harry’s mind felt strained, the same way it had when he performed the ritual to free the southern goblins. He was seeing several dozen different separate things in his thoughts, holding them all and not combining them, and he made his body an endless conduit for the magic, and he wove and wound and pulled, and by now he had come so far that he had no idea whether he was using his eyes or his sense of touch.

He felt the moment, though, when he freed the goblins. Helcas briefly reached down the flickering strands of the web as they whipped and unwound from his people, and Harry felt a touch like a handclasp.

Thank you, vates.

Harry smiled before the connection broke, and hoped that Helcas had heard his own pleasure and gratitude.

And then he fell, tossed as from a great height by the ending of the magic, and lay on the floor breathing for a moment.

He started when arms came around him. He could have climbed back to his feet when he’d taken a few minutes to rest. He craned his neck, and met his brother’s eyes.

“You didn’t think I’d let you come alone, did you?” Connor asked in disgust when he saw Harry staring at him. “I Apparated in with Peter a few minutes after you left.”

Harry sighed. “Thank you for not stopping me.” Gently, he forced himself to stand and step away. “I did tell you I’m not physically wounded, and the strain of pushing all that magic through me will pass in a moment.” He called the empty stones and the Midsummer knife to him, and slid them into his pockets.

"It was never even a temptation to you, was it?" Connor asked. Harry couldn't read the emotions in his voice. "To hold on to all that magic, to keep it for yourself?"

Harry blinked. "Yes, it was," he said. "Of course it was. But I don't need to listen to the temptation."

Connor studied him for a moment, then nodded slowly. "All right. I can understand that." He slung his arm over Harry's shoulders again. "And now you're going to come back to the school and rest, right?"

That, Harry thought, as he pictured Draco's still face and Hawthorn's broken one and Pansy's ripped body, is what you think.

Intermission: Counting Up the Dead

Hawthorn didn't know how long she had sat with her head in her hands. She didn't even know how she made it to the guest quarters the Headmistress had assigned her, to tell the truth. She remembered the haze of battle, and casting blood curses that give the Death Eaters she cast them on some pain, but not enough, never enough, before the dead her daughter had summoned, or the course of battle, or a Killing Curse, swept them away from her.

She had come away from the battle when the sirens' compulsion started. She thought that, at least. She could not remember being under the compulsion. Far stronger was the urge to kill and kill and kill and keep on killing until the hunger for blood that burned in the pit of her belly was satisfied. And then she had walked away when there were no more Death Eaters to kill.

But right beside that compulsion burned another one. It was a truth that she had acknowledged when Dragonsbane became a full-fledged necromancer, and a truth that had occurred to her as she knelt over the body of her first vengeance kill, and a truth that had slammed home into her as she listened to Harry speak about vengeance a few days after the spring equinox, his eyes bright with disgust.

Death cannot bring back the dead.

She might kill. It would not end. She could not even lose herself in the quest for revenge as Augustus Starrise had done, because she knew the world was waiting, and would not cease to change, or give her her daughter back, just because she slaughtered others. Indeed, go too far in the slaughter, and the world would put her into Tullianum and forget about her.

She hated that she knew that world existed, and that she was alone in it now.

A hand fell on her shoulder, and Hawthorn turned her head to nuzzle it even before she fully recognized the scent. Delilah Gloryflower leaned her chin down on top of Hawthorn's hair in response, and from

the other side, Claudia Griffinsnest rubbed her scarred face against her neck.

Remus had been teaching them how to build a pack bond before he chose to leave, Hawthorn thought. She had thought, apparently mistakenly, that it would only endure when in the presence of someone who had been a werewolf from childhood. But her sorrow had drawn her two packmates. She had not been aware they had come to Hogwarts, but here they were, and they were making noises, shared whimpers and growls and protests against the unfairness of the world and of life, low in their throats.

Hawthorn felt a thick bubble building in the back of her own throat. She lifted her hand to wipe at her mouth, thinking she would cough out another bundle of tears. Instead, she found herself howling, a soft call of misery.

Delilah tipped her head back and joined in. Claudia said nothing—Claudia was often silent—but curled herself almost around Hawthorn and watched her with large solemn eyes. A student, apparently drawn by the howling, peered around the corner, but Claudia showed her teeth, without even a snarl, and the girl squeaked and pounded back down the corridor.

Eventually, Delilah and Claudia persuaded Hawthorn to move off the step in front of her quarters and into her room. Hawthorn expected them to leave, but they didn't. Instead, away from the eyes of outsiders, they became more demonstrative; Delilah licked her cheek, and Claudia bit her chin. Hawthorn found herself touching and stroking back, as much with her neck, her cheeks, and her spine as her hands.

"You need to rest," Claudia said, when the silent soothing had gone on for a good many minutes and some of Hawthorn's grief had blended into tear-colored haze, like the shades of gray that she saw as a wolf.

Hawthorn didn't object, because it was as impossible to object to that as to the fact of hunger when it presented itself. She lay down on her bed, and Delilah lay down beside her, arm and hair flung haphazardly

over her. Claudia went to watch by the door, but Hawthorn could feel her warmth and smell her scent from there.

She closed her eyes and went away for a little while. The world would still be there when she woke. It would not give her Pansy back. So she could make it wait.

Wait, she said.

George sat with his fingers wound in his twin's. Fred's breathing was shallow. Madam Pomfrey had used healing spells George didn't know on him, and ones he did, and Skele-Gro to replace the shattered bones that had to be taken entirely out of his left leg, and bits of bandage when she couldn't heal all the wounds magically and there were other patients waiting to be taken care of. Her face had been in an agony when she told George that she had done as much as she could for Fred and that all they could do was wait. Making it through this first night would be the deciding point for him. Shock was a complicating factor, and so was how much magic she'd poured into him. Sometimes, when wounded in a way that would have killed it without magic, a wizard's body simply fought back, rejecting the attempts to heal it and continuing on its course of death.

She hoped he would wake up by the morning. She hoped he would.

Only the look of anguish on the matron's face as she turned away had kept George from hexing her for using the word hope.

Now he sat by Fred's side, and watched.

Their parents had already been in earlier, and Ron, and Ginny. Percy was going to come from the Ministry tomorrow morning, Mum had said, distractedly, confusedly. They wouldn't let him leave tonight, important business for Minister Scrimgeour. Bill and Charlie were traveling in from Egypt and Romania; they'd been in Britain last week, but left when it seemed there was no way to break the siege before Midsummer. Mum had stroked and petted Fred's hair and cheek constantly when she was here.

George hadn't told her that Fred's last words had been defending her from his insult, because then he would have had to explain the context of the joke, and because he didn't want to think of them as Fred's last words.

He leaned his head nearer to his twin's chest. No one else was awake in the hospital wing—even the others watching over injured friends or relatives were asleep—but plenty of people were breathing. George sometimes wished they wouldn't. It covered up the sound of Fred's shallow, wheezy breaths, and he had found that merely watching the motion of Fred's chest wasn't enough to content him any more. He had to hear.

Someone had asked him if he felt alone. George couldn't even remember who it had been, whom he had given a withering glare until the person fled with tears running down her cheeks. Ginny? Hermione Granger? No, Hermione was in another bed somewhere behind them, with Zacharias Smith asleep clasping her hand.

Alone made about as good a description of his condition right now as bloodbath did of the battle. It gave the most general outlines to the idea possible, but it didn't tell you anything.

He felt chained to the bed, unable to move away. He felt chained in his mind, too. Before, it had always bubbled with thoughts of the future. Anything moving or not moving, spoken or living or dead, might prompt a new joke idea. And since Harry had given them the Galleons, they didn't need to entertain ridiculous ideas for robbing Gringotts or laboring for years in positions they hated just to get the necessary money for their joke shop. They could go out and start showing Zonko's who the real geniuses in the joke field were right away. They were going to leave school and go out into the real world, where NEWT's didn't matter, where their mother's worries didn't matter, where the Ministry was only something to be ignored when possible and evaded when impossible. They were just beginning.

Everything was just beginning.

And now it might be ending, and George was trying to contemplate a he instead of a they, a future that did not have Fred in it, and getting nowhere. He had to stare. He had to think about the moments passing right now, and listen to Fred's rasping breath. He closed his eyes.

"I won't tell anyone."

George sighed. Someone had awakened and was having a whispered conversation with someone else. Zacharias and Hermione, probably. Smith seemed to be a light sleeper, and he'd regularly whispered things to Hermione as the night went on, stroking her forehead. She hadn't opened her eyes yet, either. George wished he could care more.

"I won't tell anyone," the voice repeated, "that you blubbered so much that I had to come back just to shut you up."

George sighed again and leaned back in his chair, waiting for the conversation to end.

An elbow jabbed him hard in the chest. He opened his eyes, and Fred said, "Are you paying attention? I'm talking to you, you great lump. Merlin, he disturbs a man's peace and then he doesn't even have the courtesy to pay attention to him when he talks—"

That was the last sentence he got to finish on his own for a while, because George had hugged him hard enough to cause his ribs to creak, and then they had to call Madam Pomfrey, who came, gave them both an incredibly hearty scolding with the words "internal injuries" in it, and then fed them a sleeping potion. Well, she gave Fred a sleeping potion, but it didn't matter who drank it, George thought, his hand firmly clasped in his brother's, because they were a them again.

Luna solemnly piled the candles, one on top of each other, their waxy ends sticking together without magic. It was very important that they meld without magic. She'd asked the house elves for them, and they'd given them to her without questions. That was only right.

When the candles were piled, seventeen of them, a perilous, swaying stack against the outline of the window in Ravenclaw Tower, Luna stepped back and cast a spell to rid the area of Wrackspurts. There didn't seem to be any. Satisfied, she drew out several Knuts that had seen travel and travail in their day, and laid them in a circle around the candles. Then she cast Incendio on the top candle. It beamed and burned brightly, and asked her what she had lit it for.

"This is for Cho," Luna told it. "She was seventeen, you know. She just turned seventeen a few days ago. And now she's gone, and she can't light her own candles or collect her own Knuts. Well, obviously. If she's gone."

She paused reflectively for a long moment. It would have been better if she'd had something of Cho's to burn, the way she'd had something of her mother's when she died, but of course Cho's family wouldn't want her to burn her possessions, and no one had wanted to hear of Luna going out on the battlefield to get some of Cho's hair. Something about it being too dangerous. Luna had tried to tell them that it wasn't dangerous on the field, because there were Crumple-Horned Snorkacks coming to chase the spirits of the dead away, but no one had wanted to listen.

"Most people don't want to listen," she told the candle. The flame swayed and agreed. No one listened to candles, either, when they asked why they were burning. Well, no one but Luna, but then, no one listened to her, either. She thought it had made her hearing better.

"Cho was seventeen," Luna went on. "She was a Seeker. She was pretty. She had a crush on Cedric Diggory, and one of the doorways in Hogsmeade told me they kissed there one day. It was in the spring. It was a day when the sky was more white than blue, but that doesn't matter. It was still spring."

She stopped again, thinking of what else to say. She hadn't been Cho's close friend, so she didn't know all that much that the stones and walls of Ravenclaw Tower, softly chattering witnesses to this ceremony, wouldn't already know. The bit of information about Cho

and Cedric kissing in Hogsmeade was the only new piece Luna could contribute.

Oh, wait. Of course. Cho's death had been on the battlefield, beyond reach of the walls' sight. So they would want to know why she was gone.

"She rode to battle because she wanted to help," said Luna. "She rode a golden horse. She owed Harry a life debt, but I don't really think that's why she went. She wanted to help." Luna let a moment more pass, and then added, "She died well."

She waved her wand again, and all the candles lit at once. And then the Knuts glowed, too, with replicas of the spells that the wizards who had last owned them had once cast. Luna smiled. She thought Cho would like the light, if she could see it.

"I hope she has fun," said Luna, and then set about blowing the candles out. It had to be done properly. And then she had other people to say goodbye for. She would do it because no one else would explain to the walls and the doors and the stones of Hogwarts where their children had gone.

Hermione did not want to wake up, even though people were asking her to, because it all hurt. She gave an irritated little wriggle and squirm, and someone called, "She's awake!"

No, I'm not, Hermione thought, and tried to hide in a corner of the bed, which must be a hospital bed, because Rosier had wounded her. I'm pretending. It's your imaginations. Go away.

But someone felt her forehead, and someone else pried her eyes open, and someone bellowed into her face, "Hermione, are you awake?"

She had to stare. There was no option, no matter how much she wanted to rest and escape the pain, because it was Zacharias, but he'd changed. He looked older, and wearier, and there was a tiny imprint high on one cheek, like a tattoo or a scar. It was a crouched badger, done in black and yellow.

She tried to reach up and touch it, and Zacharias caught her hand and kissed her knuckles. His eyes shone so bright with relief that Hermione was distracted from the image of the badger.

"You're back," he whispered. "You really are back."

"I haven't decided that yet," Hermione retorted haughtily, sitting up and wincing as tenderness flared all along her chest and her ribs and her belly and her breasts. She'd been slit open from collarbone to navel. She remembered it like a recurring nightmare. She shuddered, even as she managed a smile for Ginny and Connor, who were hovering next to her bed. "Maybe it's your imagination. Now, where did you get that?" She nodded at the badger symbol.

"I summoned Helga Hufflepuff." Zacharias's gaze ran over her, as though he thought she had somehow changed in the time between her falling to Rosier's curse and her opening her eyes. "She possessed my body and rode into battle."

Hermione spluttered. "That's dangerous!" she managed to say at last. Zacharias had told her about that particular ability of a Founder's Heir one day when they were having an argument and he was trying to impress her. It had impressed her mostly as a dangerous and ridiculous thing to do.

"And going into battle wasn't?" Zacharias held her hand again, this time hard enough to hurt, and spoke as if they were the only two people in the hospital wing.

"She could have drowned you," said Hermione, deciding to pretend that no one else was watching, too, "and then you would never have come back."

"I didn't care," said Zacharias, "not when I heard about you."

And that just wasn't fair. Hermione slapped him on the side of the head, and then nodded to the badger scar. "And that?"

“She left it for me as a sign of what she’d done.” Zacharias shrugged. “Maybe it will impress someone. I think my memories are all intact. All the important ones, at least.” He looked her straight in the eyes, showing what memories he regarded as important.

Hermione was almost grateful for the way Madam Pomfrey swooped down on them then, scattering Ginny and Connor and herding even Zacharias away while snapping about how she needed to run some diagnostic tests on Hermione. It made it easier to lie back and think about what the look in Zacharias’s eyes meant, and especially the way he’d held her hand.

He’d said he loved her. For some reason, Hermione’s usually analytical brain had accepted the words and taken them literally. She hadn’t thought he’d meant he was in love with her.

She wondered if he was actually thinking about marriage. Purebloods were bound to think that way, she knew, even Light ones. Knowing Zacharias, he might be planning how best to piss off people he didn’t like by emphasizing both her Muggle heritage and her knowledge of rituals and traditions.

We’ll see about that, Hermione thought in determination as she swallowed the sleeping potion Madam Pomfrey wanted to give her. I want to choose at least some of the people we’re going to piss off. And the wedding date, for that matter, if it actually does go that far. None of this pureblood nonsense about marrying almost the moment you’re out of school, having children early, raising them, and then going on to live your life. What if I want to do something different? I’m not going to let him talk me out of it.

Owen let Michael hug Medusa. He was good at that. He was closer to their mother. Owen was—had been—closer to their father. He had been Charles’s magical heir, after all.

And now he was the head of his family.

Owen looked at the far side of the kitchen while he thought about that, and listened to Medusa’s soft, wordless sobs. What was best for the Rosier-Henlin family? Should he asked to be released from his oath

to Harry, so that he could fight for their fortunes and their political futures, while Michael stayed to guard Harry?

But it didn't take long for Owen to conclude that he shouldn't. For one thing, Michael needed him more than their mother, or at least he would by the time they went back to school for their seventh year—at Hogwarts, Owen was sure. The fact that Medusa mourned freely now while his brother was in shock indicated that. They would have two months to spend with her. That was enough of a recovery period. Owen could look into his father's documents and set wheels spinning to draw Rosier-Henlin towards the top again in that time.

And then he would go back, because Rosier-Henlins kept their promises. And, more than that. Owen knew that he wasn't just Harry's ally, or someone who had decided to join the vates for political gain. He owed Harry his life and his sanity, and his brother's life and sanity, and he had sworn himself his companion.

Owen didn't think Harry really knew what that meant, yet. He had read histories of the ancient Lords and Ladies, but understood just enough to reject them, Owen thought. They used compulsion. They often started off with high intentions and then fell into bad ones. They manipulated other people shamelessly, using the attraction of their power and the many loopholes for strong magic built into traditional Ministry politics. They usually ended up treating even their sworn companions horribly. Owen could understand why Harry wanted to avoid that, and so would not Declare himself a Lord.

But there were exceptions. Calypso McGonagall, Light Lady though she had been, and her Sunburst Guard. Lord Windthorn Yaxley, the Dark Lord who had left none of his Sworn Brothers to die alone, and so lost none of them. The Dark Lady Genevieve, who had supposedly first brought Dementors into the world, and retained the love and loyalty of her companions through and despite that.

Their companions were protectors and protected, befriended and friends, loyal and loyally held to, when both companions and Lord were true. And Owen knew, because his father had told him, that there was no greater loyalty than that chosen with eyes open and heart laid down because it was the rational thing to do. Harry would

move through the world alone if he could, never asking for things many would willingly give him. So he needed people who would both ask for him and teach him how to ask.

I will remain at his side, Owen thought, catching Michael's eye over Medusa's bowed head. We both will. Father would have wanted that.

And, for the first time since Owen had learned that Charles Rosier-Henlin was among those who had perished on the battlefield, he felt a kind of peace.

She had no choice, but that didn't mean she had to like it.

Indigena had Apparated home to Thornhall. She had screamed in agony there for many minutes, and then one of her house elves had managed to bring her some of the healing potions she kept in her laboratory. None of them had helped. Nor had any attempt to end the curses by sheer force of will, or to lessen the pain.

So Indigena had come to her largest greenhouse, and the cocoon of tendrils she'd prepared long ago, when she first thought that she might someday die with most of her breeding experiments unfinished.

She did not object to dying of old age. And she had even thought, when her Lord called in his debt of honor, that she might not object to dying in battle. The cocoon certainly hadn't been at the forefront of her thoughts.

But now she had found out she did object to it, so she crept, shaking, to her greenhouse, and she had wrapped the vines around her. She felt their roots slide through her skin, linking up with the leaves and flowers that already lay there. She felt a shiver of sap and strength run through her, and the pain of the Bloodless Curse began to ease. The others were continuing yet.

Indigena's eyelids drooped. To work their deepest healing on her, the vines had to put her to sleep. And she might sleep for months before she woke. The vines would do whatever was needed to save her life. When she did, she would be less human than ever.

Needs must, she thought sleepily, as the tendrils drew her down into the dirt and the first great wave of slumber rolled over her.

It was not as though she could not afford to sleep for a while. Her Lord would be in hiding after this serious defeat, and not require her help. The plan he'd assigned her special attention to was already in waiting; Indigena had done the required research and made the necessary arrangements through the Daily Prophet and a reporter who'd seemed delighted to get the information. She'd contacted the paper under a false name, of course, but everything had its price.

She closed her eyes and dropped into the dark sleep of winter, unaware of anything but the healing pulses of sap and the motion of the turning earth, and the very slowly growing need to rest and wake and rise.

Harry waited steadily by Draco's bed. He imagined that he should probably sleep at some point.

And he would. When he felt tired.

One night had passed. This was the morning after the battle. Harry knew that many people were eyeing him sideways, from Ginny—able to think of something now besides her possibly dying brother and possibly dying friend, because they were both awake—to some Slytherins who undoubtedly wondered what he intended to do about Blaise. But no one had actually dared approach him yet. Harry didn't know if it was respect or fear, probably springing from the rumors about what he'd done to the children at the lakeside, that kept them away. Either way, he blessed it, and he waited for Draco to wake up and look at him and listen.

He wasn't bored. He didn't feel hungry, either, and his eyes barely ever blinked. He realized, distantly, that he'd fallen into the kind of patient, motionless waiting Lily had taught him through long winter evenings at Godric's Hollow. Waiting was as much a part of battle as the fighting, she'd said; in fact, it was usually the part that more people failed at, moving too soon and letting an enemy spot them, or moving an entire army too soon and being taken in a prepared ambush by someone quicker and cleverer. Harry had learned to let

the whole world run away from him and sit like a stone when necessary. The loudest thing in his ears was his breathing.

He almost regretted that his experience of war so far hadn't involved more scenarios like this. He'd had to scramble, to respond to attacks and ambushes, to rescue people in danger, to suddenly change his plans. There hadn't been many chances to bask in the stillness, to let his mind sink into the silence like a stone itself falling into a dark pool. He stared, and stared, and breathed, and breathed, and the only thing that could call him back was Draco's eyelids fluttering open, which eventually happened.

Harry reached out and stroked his hand, feeling almost unnaturally calm. Draco turned and stared at him, then murmured, "Harry? I—my head still hurts." He swallowed. "Are my parents here? Could I have some water?"

"Of course," Harry murmured, and reached over to fetch the goblet of water Madam Pomfrey had left on the bedside table for him. "Your parents aren't here, Draco. They came and watched over you for a while." Narcissa had tried to speak to him, Harry remembered dimly, but Lucius had touched her arm and shook his head when he saw the state Harry was in, and she'd refrained. "They're at home recovering right now. Your mother took a pain curse in the back that took some effort to heal. She's fine," he added as he saw the rising panic in Draco's face. "But your father was tired. They'll come back in—" he cast a quick Tempus charm as he helped Draco sit up to drink the water "—a few hours."

"Thank you," said Draco. He took a deep breath. Harry realized he was preparing himself for far worse news. "And what's wrong with me?"

Harry smiled gently at him. "Voldemort did tear some wounds in your mind, and mix some of his taint into you. Do you remember Snape closing the worst of the wounds?"

Draco shuddered, and his face turned so white Harry was momentarily worried that he might faint. "Some of it," he whispered.

Harry nodded, and gave him some more water. "He can't heal everything right away, which is why your head still hurts," he said. "We'll work on it in tandem, since we're both Legilimens, later. Snape's confident he can heal all the gaping wounds with my help, and then he'll give you potions that will help repair the rest. He doesn't think you lost memories, but you had some of your other pathways ripped up badly. So you might have physical symptoms for a while. Blurred vision, trouble walking, that kind of thing. Snape said it will all heal."

Draco relaxed a bit. "And the taint?" His voice had more fear in it this time.

"The Seers can help you with that," said Harry. "I spoke with Vera. She reassures me that there are people in the Sanctuary skilled at this. Even though it entered through your mind, it's really more of a soul-wound, like seeing too many of the horrors of war. So it's a good thing we're going to the Sanctuary."

Draco nodded. "When can we leave?" he demanded, sounding a bit more like his old self. "I don't want bits of Voldemort floating around in my soul for long." He made a face. "Did he ask before he infected me with his taint? No, he did not."

Harry felt a spontaneous smile break out on his face. He stooped and kissed Draco's forehead. "You'll leave in a few days, probably," he replied. "Maybe a week. When Snape and I have had time to heal your mental wounds, and he's started you on a regular course of the potions."

"Don't think I missed that, Harry." Draco curled insistent fingers into his jumper. "When you leave, you said. What about you?"

"I don't know." Harry met Draco's eyes, and held them, and let him see his frank uncertainty. "There are situations I need to lay to rest, first. Voldemort announced that I killed those children to the rest of the school. I'll need to talk with their parents. I have to make sure the werewolf situation doesn't explode while I'm gone. I'd like to find out where Acies went, or the dragon who was Acies, and what kind of

trouble she's likely to cause. If we can track Indigena Yaxley, who Apparated away alive from the battle, I'd appreciate that, too."

Draco shook his head. "Tell them to sod off," he said. "You need to rest, Harry."

"One reason I defeated Voldemort the way I did was so that we could have a summer resoundingly free of him," said Harry firmly, and helped Draco lean back on the pillows. "I don't want to be called away from the Sanctuary a few days after I get there because of one of these problems. Just let me get them settled, Draco, and I'll follow you."

Draco sighed. "And what happens if they take longer to be settled than a few weeks?"

Harry shrugged noncommittally. "Then they do."

Draco tried to scowl at him, but he was already yawning. "Did anyone we know die?" he muttered sleepily.

Harry sighed. He couldn't keep silent on this, even though he knew it would shock Draco. He didn't want to lie to him, even by simple omission on account of his weariness. "Several people," he said. "Charles Rosier-Henlin." Draco did stare at him in shock, then. "Cho Chang. Catrina Flint-Digsby." He hesitated a moment, and then finished, "Pansy. I'm so sorry, Draco."

"That bitch."

Harry blinked. "What?"

"She knew," Draco spat. "She had to have known that her death was coming, she's a fucking necromancer, and she didn't tell us!" He made a sharp slashing gesture with one hand. "Fuck that, and fuck her!"

"They're not allowed to tell anyone about their visions of death, you know that," said Harry. People were staring, and he didn't want Draco

to sound as if he were blaming Pansy for her own death, in case Hawthorn came in.

And then he realized Draco was crying, sharp sobs he was at pains to hide, and he was able to curve an arm around his shoulders and draw him against him, murmuring nonsensical, comforting words. Harry remembered he had known Pansy since they were both children together. Draco's grief would not be as keen as Hawthorn's, but it would still cut.

He murmured and almost sang until Draco went limp and soft in his arms, and Harry realized he had cried himself to sleep. Gently, he arranged his pillows, laid Draco on them, and spent a moment watching his face.

Then he went to find Snape. He was needed on battlefield cleanup—identifying the bodies, where that was possible, and arranging for disposal of the Death Eater bodies, compiling of lists of the dead, and informing the families.

No one approached him as he moved through the corridors of Hogwarts. Harry could see slitted eyes watching him, though, eyes bright with grief and rage and hatred.

It wouldn't be long.
Well. It was done.

Sirius stood in his dog form on the battlefield and looked around, slowly. It was getting to be dawn again. The second day he'd been back in the living world, and already he knew it wasn't the place for him, anymore. Everything was too hard, too substantial, and even the mud wounded his paws. And he'd been right about Connor. He'd moved on, accepted Sirius's death and gone on to live his life. There was nothing Sirius could do for Lily or James or Remus, now, and no way to make things up to Peter even if he'd been able to speak to him.

But Harry...

Sirius was waiting for one more glimpse of his godson. He faced the school and sat down, patiently, on his haunches, snapping at the ghost of a flea that thought it could hitch a ride on the dead Grim.

Harry came out of Hogwarts then, trotting over to join Snape, Trelawney, and Vector as they identified bodies. He did have a brief argument with Snape before he did, Sirius saw, an argument he almost lost. Good. Snape would probably force Harry to get some rest soon. It soothed Sirius to know that his godson was being taken care of by at least one person, even if that person had to be Snivellus.

We certainly didn't do right by him, eh, James?

But Sirius had been dead for more than two years now, and really, the sting of that wound had modulated. What was important was that Harry was living now, and going on in the world he still belonged to, and to which Sirius didn't, any more.

He satisfied himself by trotting close to Harry and watching his eyes. They were too shuttered, too grim, too old, he thought. Harry was making himself into someone who would heal and comfort and soothe other people, and face his crimes—as he saw them—but Sirius wondered if he would take time for himself.

He better, Sirius thought. Or Peter and Malfoy and Snape will yell at him until he does.

He couldn't. His part was done, now, and he was going away.

He licked Harry's hand with a ghostly tongue. He was pleased beyond words to see Harry start and glance down at his hand. He barked, and Harry lifted his head, eyes disbelieving, mouth forming the word Sirius?

Sirius barked one more time, and then the world around him faded and the darkness was back. He looked up, and there above him were the holes into somewhere else, like stars the color of rotting muscle.

The voices called from them. From one came a faint smell of starlight.

Sirius rose, and went home.

Chapter Ninety-Five: The Greatest Of These Is Love

Minerva found Harry talking to Hawthorn Parkinson in her guest quarters, with the door open as though to welcome anyone who might pass by. Minerva stood in silence a moment, watching them. Godric hovered close at her shoulder, but as a shadow, so that no one else could see him.

Harry was currently listening to a low-voiced stream of despair Hawthorn was pouring out, his hand clasping one of hers so hard that Minerva wondered she didn't wince. But it seemed bodily sensation was almost beyond her; what mattered were the words, and the ear willing to hear them. Whenever Hawthorn did stop to ask an anguished question, Harry responded instantly, though Minerva couldn't hear the answers, either. His hand stroked hers, and he never looked away from her face. Now and then he blinked, but he wasn't forcing back tears of his own. Minerva wondered that he could be so dry-eyed.

She hated to disturb him, but it had been three days since the battle, and that meant news had had time to spread—especially since some of the friends and older siblings of the children who'd died by the lake had combined knowledge of what Voldemort had said with knowledge of where their friends or siblings had died, and written their parents. Two of those parents were waiting in Minerva's office right now. She'd argued by Floo with them, until one of them threatened to confront Harry out of her sight and the other threatened to take this straight to the Ministry. Reluctantly, Minerva had allowed them to come through.

"Come in, Headmistress," Harry said, when a pause came in Hawthorn's narration.

Minerva started, then scolded herself. She'd been foolish to think that Harry was unaware of anything happening around him in the wake of a battle like that. She stepped into the room, nodding to Mrs. Parkinson. Hawthorn leaned back against the pillows of her bed, closing her eyes. The strain in her face had eased, Minerva thought.

"Harry, I hate to disturb you," she began.

“But there’s someone who needs to talk to me?” Harry nodded and climbed off the bed. “I thought there would be.” He turned to Hawthorn while Minerva was still trying to understand what that statement meant. “Don’t worry, ma’am,” he murmured. “I think it could go wrong, but you did what you did in the heat of the moment. If Indigena Yaxley is still alive—and most people seem to think that’s what Thornhall being shut up in wards means—then we’ll bring her down eventually. I won’t say that her life is reserved for you to take, of course.”

She was talking to him about her daughter, then, and the revenge she took on her daughter’s killer, Minerva thought, and felt a surge of both helplessness and anger. Why are we leaning on him, depending on him to absolve us? It’s ridiculous. We should be able to take comfort from someone else and let him rest.

Hawthorn gave a quiet laugh. “I would never ask that, Harry.”

“Good.” Harry smiled at her, and then turned to face Minerva. She was startled anew to realize that he was taller than he had been at the start of the year, his head almost reaching her collarbone. “Shall we, Headmistress?” He arched an eyebrow at her, and she nodded and led him down the hall towards the gargoyle.

She kept glancing at him as they walked, trying to gauge something of his mood. She couldn’t. The expression on Harry’s face was serene, bone-deep determination, and nothing more than that.

Minerva had been aware of him and his activities over the past few days, of course. It was hard not to be. Harry seemed to be everywhere: in the hospital wing, helping to heal young Mr. Malfoy of the gaping wounds in his mind; with his grieving allies, talking them out of their grief; listening in silence to those who needed to scream out their pain, whether or not that pain was directed towards him; helping to identify bodies and send them home to their families; helping Severus brew more potions, both the ones Mr. Malfoy would need and the ones he wouldn’t; incinerating the giants’ bodies; speaking with the creatures in the Forbidden Forest, to make sure there were no Death Eaters hiding in the trees.

Minerva had passed him a few times in the hallways, and asked if he was well. Harry had smiled at her each time and nodded, except for the last, when he'd said, "Yes, Headmistress. Believe me, I'm doing what I want to be doing. It's what I wish I could have done during the siege, but I was consumed with grief then. Now I can look outside myself, and I see how many other people need help."

The statement continued to make Minerva uneasy, but she wasn't sure what she could do about it. Most people in the castle did seem to look to Harry, even if only as a pair of welcoming, listening ears. And if Harry had adopted the role of his own free will and wasn't depriving himself of food and sleep to do so—and she had seen no signs that he was—then did she have the right to object?

Harry was singing softly under his breath, Minerva realized, when she came back to herself. "Who are the parents, Headmistress?" he asked, breaking off his song the moment he realized she was looking at him.

"Aurora Whitestag," said Minerva. "Her son Abelard was one of the children who died by the lake, a first-year Hufflepuff. And her daughter Heloise slid into a coma in the hospital wing and never woke."

Harry nodded. "And the other?"

"Philip Willoughby." Minerva hesitated a moment. "He's a Muggle. His daughter Alexandra was a first-year Ravenclaw. She died by the lake, too."

Harry blinked. "I'm glad our owl reached him. I wasn't sure how much the Muggleborn students' families knew about what was happening here."

Minerva pressed her lips together as she thought of the angry, grieving man she'd left in her office. "Mr. Willoughby was very involved in his daughter's life," she said slowly. "He was proud that Alexandra was a witch. He had a fireplace installed in his home so he could use the Floo connection, he regularly receives the Daily

Prophet, and I believe that he was learning the history of the wizarding world with her.”

“And?” Harry prompted.

Minerva gave him a look meant to chill him out of asking anything further. Harry just returned it with his serene one, and Minerva sighed. Harry might be one of her students, and in some things he could be treated as one, but not in this.

“And she was his only immediate family,” Minerva admitted. “His wife died some time ago, apparently. He has no other children.”

Harry closed his eyes.

Minerva turned to face him and gripped his shoulders. Now she did think of something she should have done, but, of course, too late, too late. Both Whitestag and Willoughby had threatened to “do something” if she wasn’t back to her office with Harry in an hour at the most. Minerva should have talked about the children under the Life-Web with Harry, and how they mirrored her own sacrifice of killing children too wounded to live at Ottery St. Catchpole seventeen years ago. Minerva had acquired the full story from Severus, but not had any chance to talk to Harry about it.

“Harry,” she said. “He will say many unfortunate things. He already has,” she added, thinking of what he’d said through her Floo connection, which had finally been repaired the day after the battle. “That does not mean you should take them to heart. You did what you had to on the battlefield, what I think needed to be done and what no one else could have managed.”

Harry opened his eyes and gave her a confused look. “That’s not what I was upset about, Madam,” he said. “I know that he’ll be angry and grieving, and so will Aurora Whitestag. How can I possibly condemn them for that? I was only sorry that he’d lost his only daughter, and that Mrs. Whitestag has lost two of her children. I wished I could resurrect them, somehow, but I know there’s no magic that allows one to return the dead to the living world, not truly.”

Again, Minerva felt as if she'd missed something. Harry's face was already serene once more, and he started up the corridor, though he paused a few steps on to look back at her over his shoulder. "Headmistress? Are you coming? Did they ask that you be there when they spoke with me? Perhaps you should rest."

Minerva shook her head and caught up with Harry. As a matter of fact, she did need rest—all the professors did—but there was no way that she would let Harry face this alone. She had not had to do this, since the parents of the children massacred at Ottery St. Catchpole had been told that their children died of their wounds rather than being killed, but her fellow rescue-murderers had not left her alone in the days immediately afterward, either. Minerva would stand with Harry.

And if I can learn what I'm missing, then so much the better. Harry had himself braced when he entered McGonagall's office. It could not have been easy to lose two children or to lose your only child. He told himself that, and kept grief and sympathy at the forefront of his mind. He kept, as well, his own determination to accept what came, and to balance it with the other duties that he had yet to complete. He could not act as if he were above the laws of the wizarding world, not and be a good leader. On the other hand, allowing these two parents to send him to prison just now would not serve Draco, or the grieving people in the castle who still needed to talk to him, or his arrangements for Edith Bulstrode to go to France with a private tutor—Harry had granted Henrietta permission to join the battle so long as she never tried to see her daughter, but Edith was too intolerably nervous with her mother in the same building—or the werewolf problem and the necessity to reply to a letter from Loki he'd received yesterday. He would explain his perception of the situation to Aurora Whitestag and Philip Willoughby, and hope they would be reasonable, and see that he couldn't stand trial for war crimes or anything else right now. He had too much to do.

He'd locked his own emotions deep in Occlumency pools, and called on his magic to support his body and mind. He really should have done this during the siege, but the grief had been too strong for an Occlumency pool then and his magic too occupied with other things. No one was calling on him to use his magic now, except in healing

Draco, but his ear and his mind and his money and his political power. So it could go to making sure his mind stayed clear and thoughtful, and his body strong when it wanted to collapse, and his possible soul-wounds in abeyance.

A woman and a man waited in chairs in front of McGonagall's desk. Aurora Whitestag, when she faced him, had a cascade of dark hair that reminded Harry of her daughter Heloise, before they'd arranged transportation of her body home to her mother. Her robes were white, lined with silver, and simple—the robes of an undeclared witch. Her dark eyes were narrow as she studied him, but she actually nodded to him, and a soft smile ran across her lips. Harry inclined his head back, and turned to face the man.

Philip Willoughby was an impressive figure, fully as tall and strong as Bill Weasley, though considerably heavier. His brown hair was frazzled, and his hazel eyes, which Harry thought were probably as kind as Connor's normally, already bore the look of too many tears and not enough sleep. He stared at Harry as if he were the answer to a riddle he'd been pursuing for years. Harry did his best not to let it disconcert him as he nodded back.

"Mrs. Whitestag, Mr. Willoughby," said Harry, and took a third chair that sat off to the side of McGonagall's desk. She'd placed him closer to her than to the parents, Harry noticed, and subtly shoved the chair back to a more neutral, central position when the Headmistress wasn't looking. "My name is Harry. Please, ask me any questions or tell me anything you wish."

"I want to know the circumstances of my daughter's death," said Philip. "Obviously." His hands clenched over and then into each other, almost tearing the skin. He hadn't blinked yet.

"I would also like to know the circumstances of my son's," Aurora added, in a softer voice.

Harry nodded. "Voldemort attacked the school on the eighth of June, thirteen days before Midsummer," he began calmly. "Besides having Death Eaters attack the carriages that were taking students home, he captured a dozen children—mostly first-years and second-years—

and put them in a Life-Web.” He looked questioningly at Aurora, but her face reflected blankness, and of course so did Philip’s, so Harry explained. “A Life-Web gathers many lives and puts them in the control of the caster. Voldemort could will them to die, injure themselves, go mad, become wounded, or suffer in many other ways as long as he held control of that web. Other magic could still affect them, but only until he noticed and ended the spell’s effects. And only he could undo the spell.”

Aurora was staring at him. Philip was looking down at his hands.

“I did what I could to ease their suffering,” Harry said. His grief and rage were somewhere far under the stony surface he’d constructed for himself. He couldn’t be blinded by his own emotions right now. His magic traveled in a smooth, continuous flow through his body, easing muscles that might have tightened, supporting him when he might have sagged, eating built-up weariness. “I tried a healing spell, and I tried to eat the Life-Web—“

“I don’t understand,” said Philip abruptly, looking up. “Eat it?”

“I can eat magic,” said Harry. “I tried to absorb the web into myself. It didn’t work. There are some laws of magic that can’t be broken, and apparently the Life-Web being altered only by its caster is one of them.” He sighed. “Voldemort said he would free the children if I went down to him.”

“And you didn’t even consider that?” Philip’s voice sounded as if the words were torn out of him, probably carrying large chunks of his throat with them.

“Voldemort doesn’t keep his promises,” said Harry. “I would have gone down to him, and he would have continued torturing them.”

“But you don’t know that,” said Philip intently, leaning forward. “Perhaps he would have kept this one. How can you know?” Harry winced; his voice was gradually edging upward. “How do you know that Alexandra isn’t alive only because of your selfishness, and not because of—“

“Because Harry is the only one who can kill You-Know-Who,” Aurora interrupted. She had never looked away from Harry. Her voice was as soft as her smile had been. She leaned back, hands clasped around her knee. Harry eyed her. He found it hard to read her. “He’s the Boy-Who-Lived. If he went down to him, the war would be over. Alexandra might have lived, and Abelard too, but the war would be over.”

“I could have taken Alexandra back home,” Philip said. “No one would ever have to know. She loves this world, and so do I, but I’d trade it for her life.”

Harry winced, and kept his voice respectfully low as he said, “Mr. Willoughby, Hogwarts keeps records of all its students. Voldemort targets Muggleborns particularly, because he thinks they’re polluting the wizarding world. He would have learned about Alexandra’s existence and come after you eventually.”

“You don’t know that,” Philip insisted. “You don’t.”

Harry inclined his head. “Perhaps I don’t.”

“I would like to finish listening to the story,” said Aurora mildly.

Harry turned back to her. “I had to choose. While Voldemort taunted me with the children in the Life-Web, other children were dying behind me on the battlefield, and since my magic is so strong, and I can eat my enemies’ power, I could make a difference in turning the tide there. I didn’t know of a way to make Voldemort’s captives stop suffering. I didn’t know of a way to free them. So I chose to give them heart attacks, as quick and painless a death as I could. Voldemort didn’t sense the spell in time to stop me, and I think he believed I would never kill them anyway, so it worked. And then I turned to rescuing the others.” He turned his hand up. “That was what happened.”

“You don’t seem that torn up about it,” Aurora said, her voice cool for the first time.

Harry met her eyes. “That’s because I’m using Occlumency to suppress my emotions, ma’am,” he said. “I spent a lot of time grieving

during the siege of Hogwarts, enough that I almost went outside and let Voldemort have me. My brother made me promise not to, but it was a near thing. And right now, if I let what I was really feeling through, then I'd be weeping too hard to talk to you, and certainly too hard to tell you what really happened or listen to your grief and understand it."

Aurora stared at him again, but Philip had another question. "And if you really can kill You-Know-Who," he asked, knuckling one eye as if that would keep the tears from falling, "why didn't you kill him, and free the children from the Life-Web that way?"

"Because I'd tried before," said Harry, "with the strongest curses I know. Nothing happened. Voldemort has made arrangements to keep himself immortal; that shows because I bounced his own Killing Curse back at him the night he came after me and my brother, and he still survived it. I've wounded him now, and he has to hide. That means I have time to figure out what's keeping him immortal, destroy it, and then kill him."

"You can't, really," Philip whispered. "I thought when Alexandra told me about this Boy-Who-Lived nonsense that it was just that, nonsense. And it is. If you can't kill him when he holds a dozen children captive, then when can you do it? I think you chose your life over theirs." His voice was rising again. "I've been reading wizarding history. Dark Lords, Light Lords, this supposed vates—it's all the same, all about power, and they'll grant exceptions to powerful wizards that they won't to anyone else."

"Well, no more. You may be a powerful wizard, but you're still a murderer, and I'll see you brought to trial for that."

Harry flinched, but forced himself to nod. "I don't know if you would win, but I don't intend to blast your head off or use compulsion to change your mind," he said quietly. "I think there is one difference between me and a Lord, sir. I try not to hold myself above others, and if that means submitting to wizarding law because the Ministry has decided to try me for war crimes, then that's what it means."

"Harry," said McGonagall sharply.

Harry glanced at her with a frown, wondering why she had interrupted. She wouldn't want them to think that she was ignoring their children because she's prejudiced in my favor. The Headmistress of Hogwarts has to be more neutral in public than in private. "I'm not done explaining yet, Headmistress," he said calmly, and then turned back to Aurora and Philip. "I do have other problems to handle first," he told them. "People I'm trying to heal of wounds they received in the battle. Arrangements to make regarding political struggles I'm a part of. Accounts to set up. So, while I certainly can't dictate how you react, that's where I'm coming from. It's not that I don't care about what happened, or feel guilt." He wished he could let a bit of the grief out, but it was too powerful. It would mingle with his grief for Pansy, Charles, Cho, and all the others who had died, and leave him a sobbing wreck. "But I can't stop living my life and only care about what trial you might put me through."

"I, for one, will not be calling for a trial," said Aurora Whitestag quietly.

Philip snapped, "I don't really need your help. I'll pursue this on my own, if I have to, but first I'm going to talk to some of the other parents who lost children."

"Why?" Harry asked her. In some ways, he thought she would have been even more likely to demand a trial, since she would understand the consequences of the magic and the ways of the Ministry better than a Muggle.

"Because I do believe that you are the Boy-Who-Lived, and the only one who can defeat You-Know-Who," said Aurora. One hand trembled, but she quickly caught it with the other and hid it in her lap. "We need you. A trial will only divert your attention and sap your political strength. At the same time, chaos seems to follow in your wake, and having you at Hogwarts is a danger to the other children. So, for the sake of those children who are still alive, and not because I think Heloise and Abelard deserve to see you be imprisoned, I'm going to push for you to be put in private custody, Harry, somewhere far away from Hogwarts, and trained until you can defeat You-Know-Who." She met his eyes, her own open and honest and quietly determined. "Our world needs you. But it needs its safety, too."

McGonagall leaned forward. "Mrs. Whitestag, Mr. Willoughby," she said. "You should understand that Voldemort's early attack was not Harry's fault. The wards failed to protect the children as we thought they would. The blood of the children who died that day is on the hands of Voldemort and his Death Eaters, not on Harry's. And a quick death is surely better than—"

"You wouldn't say that," Philip snarled at her, "if you had lost a child of your own."

McGonagall's eyes were glacial when she looked back at him. "I did, Mr. Willoughby. I am the Headmistress of this school. Every child who died, on the battlefield and before the siege, is a child of mine. And I've been responsible for not just deaths, but suffering, and being the guardian of the suffering and trying to ease them. Harry has been asked to play a role that no one else has, that of guardian and protector of our entire world, and for us to condemn him for the consequences of that role is selfish and hypocritical."

"Someone who is guardian and protector of our entire world should be more responsible," said Aurora. "Not only with his safety, but with the safety of others." She nodded to Harry, her face like a glass mask—set, with light shining from behind. "I am sorry, Harry. I truly think this is the best course. The protection of the living is more important than vengeance for the dead."

"On that, we can agree," said Harry. "But I don't think that imprisoning me is the best answer, Mrs. Whitestag."

"I said nothing about imprisoning you," she murmured. "I do think you should be kept in a private location and trained. Our world needs you, Harry, and not as a student in a school. You have to take on an adult role, and that means that you need to be treated like an adult." She rose and nodded to McGonagall. "Thank you for taking the opportunity to meet with me, Headmistress. I will be in contact." She strode over to McGonagall's fireplace, taking out a pinch of Floo powder and casting it into the flames. A name that Harry couldn't quite catch, and she was gone.

That left Philip, who was leaning back with his head against the chair behind him, his chest heaving as he struggled to control sobs or shouts; Harry didn't know which. He let some moments pass, and then said, "Mr. Willoughby."

Philip's eyes snapped open, and he gave Harry a look of acute loathing, enough that Harry recoiled. Then he rose like an old man and stared at McGonagall.

"I'm going home now, too," he said. "Be sure I'll be in touch, Headmistress."

Harry watched as he hobbled to the fireplace and called, "Willoughby house!" as he used the Floo powder. Harry swallowed all his mingled emotions as he watched him go. He wished Philip wasn't doing this, but how could he condemn the man? He was acting out of love and grief.

"Harry."

Harry started and turned to look at McGonagall. She had her mouth set in a thin line, and she had leaned over and taken hold of his hand without his noticing it.

"Willoughby will have a difficult time bringing you to trial," she said. "You are underage as yet. Wizarding law usually refuses to try someone for war crimes and murder until they are at least seventeen." Harry nodded, thinking of Evergreen, the sixteen-year-old werewolf, whom the Wizengamot had preferred to keep in Tullianum indefinitely rather than condemning him to a permanent stay there, and Gilbert Rovenan, who would have suffered no worse than expulsion and wand-breaking. "I am worried about Whitestag, however. She may press the Wizengamot into trying to take custody of you precisely because you are the Boy-Who-Lived as well as underage. I think few of the Wizengamot members who sat in on your parents' trial would really believe that you do not consider the ethical ramifications of your actions, but in light of what is happening with the werewolves, they may do—something unfortunate—in the name of the safety of the wizarding world."

Harry nodded again. He knew. “What do you think is the best course then, Headmistress?” he asked.

“For Severus to remove you from the school as soon as possible,” said McGonagall bluntly. “You need time to rest, to recover, to heal, Harry, and I do think it would be better done away from Hogwarts, where there are not so many memories to plague you. And if you were in an isolated place where no one could find you easily, then we could easily tell Mrs. Whitestag and anyone who asked that you had gone for training. They would not know the difference. By the time you returned to Hogwarts at the end of August, then we could claim, in turn, that you had completed your training and now were on the path to defeating Voldemort.”

“I don’t know if I can learn the truth about defeating him in that time,” Harry said.

McGonagall laughed. It was not a happy sound. “There are times when you need to think more like a Slytherin, Harry,” she said. “Of course we won’t give out any details when Whitestag and her supporters demand them. They could leak back to Voldemort, wherever he’s hiding. We need to keep them secret for the good of the wizarding world. So you can pursue research when you have time for it, and if it takes a while—no one can blame you for not defeating Voldemort immediately.”

Harry stirred uneasily. He knew the perfect candidate for the isolated place where he would convince most people that he was training in ethics and in magic. The Sanctuary’s location was unknown to many, Vera had reassured him, and the “shadows” surrounding it, which tended to delay owls, also made it impossible for anyone with hostile intent to find it.

But if he went there with the situation still unresolved and brewing, wouldn’t it look like he was running away from efforts to bring him to trial, when he needed to show everyone that he didn’t consider himself above the law?

He said as much to McGonagall. Her answer was unexpected.

“That is what I have been missing,” she exclaimed, slapping her hand onto her desk. Harry blinked at her.

“I had the idea that something was strange about you, Harry, but I couldn’t tell what it was,” she said, her words burring slightly. “You are doing what you can to heal others and help, but you have once again pushed your own healing away.”

“I haven’t,” said Harry. “I promise you, ma’am. I haven’t been neglecting myself the way I used to whenever I got angry. I haven’t drowned in grief. I’m only maintaining this mask over my emotions until I have some time to grieve. And that isn’t yet. As you pointed out, there are other people to be healed.”

McGonagall said nothing, simply watched him as if he were a mouse. Harry was the one who shifted after a moment. He needed to go speak to Connor, and then talk to Snape about his upcoming Apparition to Copley-by-the-Sea. There were some treasures there, powerful and magical but capable of nothing useful, which Harry intended to drain of their power. He would do his best to restore the magic of the children who had been turned into Squibs when that was done.

“Can I go, Madam?” he asked after a moment.

“Go,” McGonagall murmured.

Harry stood up, nodded to her, and walked out of the office, wondering at his own urge to flee.

“Severus. If you have a moment?”

Snape turned in surprise. McGonagall stood watching him from the doorway. Snape smothered his irritation that he hadn’t heard her approach. She had probably had one of the Founders remove his wards.

“Minerva,” he said, with a shallow nod, and cast a temporary charm on the Veritaserum to hold it in its current stage. “Is this about Harry?”

McGonagall smiled faintly and moved into the room. "Of course," she murmured. "What else would I speak to you about?"

"I am Deputy Headmaster." Snape folded his arms and told himself he would not get huffy. No one but Dumbledore had ever been able to make him get huffy. "The defense of the school and the continuation of my brewing healing potions seem likely items."

"This is not a problem truly concerned with defense of the school, though some people would think it is."

McGonagall described the meeting between Philip Willoughby, Aurora Whitestag, and Harry, and what the parents of the dead children intended to do about it. Snape stood still throughout. He noted the names, and thought distantly that it was a pity neither of them was a werewolf.

"And they think they can do this?" he hissed, when McGonagall was done. He had other questions, including why he hadn't been summoned to this meeting, but that was the most prominent.

"When word gets out of what happened to the children in the Life-Web, as it inevitably will?" McGonagall massaged her forehead and sighed. "With the Minister on a short leash with the Wizengamot at the moment? With Harry's name linked, rightly or wrongly, with so much other trouble in our world? I fear that there will be many queuing up to help them."

Snape coiled his wandless magic back inside him. It wanted to lash out and break a head, or at least a leg. But since McGonagall was the only person in the room with him, that wouldn't be productive. "Then he must be taken away," he said. "Your solution is the only one that makes sense, to remove him from the school and pretend that someone is training him to defeat the Dark Lord." He permitted himself a sneer, feeling as if he would burst if he didn't. "As if one could be trained to do that. If that was all it took, Moody would have trained himself into readiness long ago."

"I know, Severus." McGonagall leaned forward. "And I think the Seers' Sanctuary, where he intended to go anyway, is the best choice."

But for the deception to be complete, you will have to disappear as well, to make it seem as if his guardian decided this was the best thing for Harry. And I know that you have no wish to go to the Sanctuary.”

Snape snarled. “I do not.” There were locked boxes in his soul that no one had the right to touch, and doors that would remain shut. But, on the other hand, it was not as if he were going to be healed, as Pettigrew or Lupin had, as Harry and Draco would. He was certain he could remain himself even in the midst of people anxious to “help” him. “But I have never yet spent a full summer with Harry since I have known him, and I think that has helped hurt him.” He met McGonagall’s eyes. “I wish to spend this one with him.”

McGonagall closed her eyes and nodded. “Thank you, Severus,” she murmured. “Good. But then, of course, we have another problem. Harry thinks he will be seen as running away from wizarding law if he goes to the Sanctuary, and that is not something he wants.”

Snape smirked. This one, at least, he knew how to approach. “Leave that to me,” he said.

“You think you can persuade him?” McGonagall frowned. “Forgive me, Severus, but Harry’s convictions of justice are so strong that—“

“Not me,” said Snape. “I agree, he would think I was acting solely out of a guardian’s duties, and he would refuse to listen, because he thinks his own duties more important. But there is someone whom he will never resist.”

“Perfect.” The relief in Harry’s voice was unmistakable to Draco, even more so than the tendril of Legilimency he used to stroke Draco’s mind as he retreated from yet another healing of wounds. “They’re coming along nicely, Draco. The last big holes are almost closed. Some of the effects will linger for a time—that’s what the potions are for, of course—but you should be able to go to the Sanctuary as early as the day after tomorrow.”

Draco opened his eyes, and gave Harry a smile he knew was strained. But Snape had come in earlier and explained exactly what

Harry was doing to himself and why, and Draco was horrified and disgusted and more than a little disappointed in Harry. After everything he promised...

"And you won't be coming with me, will you, Harry?" he asked.

Harry started, and then he relaxed and smiled. Draco reached out intently now, and caught the faintest whiff of roses—Harry's magic. It was working to make that relaxation and the smile look natural. Draco growled softly under his breath. He's relying on his magic just to function. He said he wouldn't.

"Of course I will, Draco," Harry said. "I promised. I can't give you an exact date, yet, but I should be no more than a week or two behind. At the very latest. It might take three weeks to settle the werewolf problem—I'm still debating how to reply to the letter Loki sent me—but—"

"You promised otherwise," said Draco, and heard his voice grow darker all on its own. He thought he might have had to feign the emotion. No need. "You promised, Harry. When I was wounded, you said that we would go to the Sanctuary together, and you would spend your time thinking about healing and about me."

Harry's stare sharpened. "Did Snape put you up to this?"

Damn, damn, damn. Draco felt as he had when he confronted his father. Potentially devastating emotional consequences were spinning past him, and he had to choose which one to ride.

He chose the truth.

"He told me what you've been doing," said Draco. "Helping everyone else. Putting aside your own grief. Yielding to these mad plans to bring you to trial or force you to remove yourself from Hogwarts. And now I can smell your magic, Harry. You're using it to just to keep your feet."

Harry ran his hand through his hair, and looked put out. "It would be stupid to do something I've promised I wouldn't, Draco," he said. "I

haven't been skipping meals or sleep, I promise. The only reason I've tamped my emotions down with Occlumency is because otherwise I would be a sobbing wreck, and I would get nothing done, including healing you, which I need to happen." The look in his eyes as he said that almost took Draco's breath away. "I can't show that I think I'm above the law, or that I'm frightened of what they can do to me. And yes, I'm using my magic, but it's only to get everything done that I need to. The world doesn't stop spinning just because there was a battle here, Draco. Loki has not stopped being an idiot, for example."

"There are two words you need to learn, Harry," said Draco.

"Only two?" Harry cocked one eyebrow, and the very last remains of Draco's empathy let him catch what felt like a quiver of anger. Harry was enraged, or close to it, but keeping it mostly off his face and out of his voice.

"Yes," said Draco. "In this case, only two."

"And what are they?" Harry's rage was almost gone again, but it reassured Draco to know he had felt it.

"Sod off," said Draco.

Harry nodded once, his lips tightening, and started to turn away. Draco caught the stump of his left wrist.

"I didn't mean that you had to sod off, Harry," he said, lifting one hand to hold Harry's cheek. He could feel him shaking from this close, and his determination increased. Yes, he wanted this for himself, wanted Harry beside him as he healed and rid his soul of Voldemort's taint, but, by Merlin, Harry needed this, too. He'd fought so hard for them to have a summer free of war, and now he was going to sacrifice it on an altar to grief and misguided honesty. Draco wouldn't let him. "I meant, tell them that. There's a point at which you're not granting people reasonable requests, but letting them take advantage of you."

"I know that!" Harry snapped, and the headboard of Draco's bed rattled. Harry's eyes closed, and he pulled himself away until only Draco's grip on his wrist held him there. "You and Snape keep talking

about it," Harry went on. "But I don't know where it is. And when I do indulge my grief, it's a horrid mistake, and then when I don't, it's another horrid mistake again. I don't understand you." His mask broke for a moment. Draco could see the misery battering away just beneath the surface, combined with guilt and Harry's terror of doing the wrong thing. Then they went away again as Harry bolted the serene lie back on top of them. "I'm erring on the side of caution," he whispered. "If the choice is between giving up a summer holiday and being a leader, or hiding myself away from the outside world and ignoring problems that won't solve themselves...if I can prevent evil, Draco, and I don't, that's evil, too. And Merlin knows what the werewolves would do if I was out of contact for that long, or the Ministry, or the parents of the dead children. And yes, I hate that they're talking about bringing me to trial, or else taking me away from you and Snape and everyone else I love, and part of me wants to tell them to go fuck themselves. But I don't know where that point is where they're taking advantage of me. Maybe a trial is a perfectly right and reasonable thing to request, and I'm heading down Dumbledore's paths by trying to justify those children sacrificed in the name of war. I don't know, Draco. I've lost my footing, and all the roads look the same unless I can ease pain somehow."

And Draco knew what to do, then. The tumbling swords of consequence could fall where they will. He knew what to say and how to say it.

"And that's why you need to come to the Sanctuary with me, Harry," he murmured, gently. He stretched up from the pillows, ignoring his pounding head, and put his hand behind Harry's neck, pulling him closer. "They can help you find your footing again. I want you with me because I want you there as I heal. I want you there because I want to see you healed. And I want you there because I can see a life beyond the war. This war won't last forever, Harry. What happens if you make yourself into a leader and a weapon, and then someday, our world doesn't need you to be those things anymore? You would fall apart, I think." He tugged Harry forward again, until their foreheads rested against each other. "And I don't want you to fall apart," he whispered. "I want you to stay alive for a good long time."

Harry said nothing. His breathing had a sound of tears. Draco held himself still, and waited. Snape had thought Harry wouldn't be able to resist a plea from him, which was wrong, of course. But more than that, Draco thought Harry deserved a choice, with all his options laid out starkly before him.

"All right," Harry whispered.

Draco felt his heart clamp closed. He pulled away and considered Harry's face, the tight lines and still-shut eyes, carefully. "You mean that?" he said at last.

"Yes." Harry forced his eyes open. "I'm just so tired, Draco. I can't do this for much longer. And even though I do think it's self-indulgent, in some ways, it would be better to retreat and heal myself than break down when the Wizengamot questions me, or when one more person asks me why I didn't save his friend or her sister. I want some joy in my life again. And I don't think I could really have let you go to the Sanctuary alone." Harry swallowed. "I promise. Three days. I promise. I give you my word by bone and blood and breath that I'll go with you then."

Draco couldn't find words to explain what that meant to him. So he kissed Harry instead, the fiercest kiss they'd shared yet, flavored with teeth and tongues and blood. Harry kissed back, forcing some of his grief and rage out, Draco thought. When that was done, Harry hugged Draco hard enough to make his head throb.

"Thank you again," Harry said, "for loving me and having faith in me."

Draco closed his eyes, and let the warmth soak in.

Chapter Ninety-Six: The Second Greatest Is Justice

Harry sat down at his desk in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom—it was easier to find space to be alone, now that most of the students had gone home and Acies, of course, was gone as well—and placed a piece of blank parchment in front of himself. It was important that his handwriting in his letter to Loki not be shaky, even if only from the wobbling of a book on his knee.

Now that he had made the decision to go with Draco to the Sanctuary, he had a very clear picture of what he needed to accomplish in the next few days. That meant that the letter he was writing now had to be one that would convince Loki to leave matters alone while Harry was away from the wizarding world and unable to receive owls quickly. Whatever else it did was secondary.

Harry chose bluntness. Subtlety and wit and attempts to make Loki see other perspectives sure as hell didn't seem to work.

June 25th, 1996

Dear Loki:

I am going into hiding this summer, to train in the unexpectedly Voldemort-free time that this battle has produced. That means that I won't be in the wizarding world. You may think this means that you will be able to bite whomever you like, and I will not object. Conversely, you may think the Ministry has the freedom to do whatever it likes to werewolves.

That is not true. I do object, and when I return, if either of those things has happened, I will bring the force of all my magic down on the offender. My oath to help werewolves says nothing about helping them bite others who have not chosen to be werewolves and violate their free will; in fact, my task as vates says that I cannot encourage such things unless I want to risk becoming no more than a Lord. There are other werewolves besides your pack, Loki, and I shall throw my strength behind theirs, so that they will achieve what they want and not what you want. And if the Ministry threatens werewolves,

I will help them—but, once again, I will not do it merely to help your pack, but to help all your kind.

You have claimed to want and need my influence in the political arena. I am removing it for the summer. When I do bring it back, do you really wish to be responsible for my opposing or ignoring you? Your best choice, it seems to me, is to refrain from encouraging the Ministry to hunt you without my protection. Reclaim a moral position and the defensive ground. If you do not, if you are hunted not because you are werewolves and the Wizengamot is unfairly prejudiced against you but because you have bitten others, then you will have a second enemy when I come back.

Harry.

Harry would send that with Hedwig, so that Loki would understand he was serious about this. Then he turned to his second letter. This one, luckily, could be written in a tone of more reconciliation and kindness than the first one had been.

June 25th, 1996

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

I would like to meet with you within the next three days, assuming that you have the time and freedom to do so. If not, then I will send you a final letter when the three days are over, explaining my position and what I intend to do this summer.

Yours sincerely,

Harry.

That would go with one of the school owls. Harry looked at the next dozen sheets of parchment that waited, and drew in a harsh breath. He had asked McGonagall for the names of the parents whose children he had killed. She had argued with him, telling him that it would serve no purpose for him to write to them, especially Aurora and Philip, and only strain him more. She had relented and given him

the names only when Harry assured her that he intended to go to the Sanctuary for the summer.

He didn't want to write the letter, but he had to. They deserved to know all the details of the story, not mere rumors and false information. And they deserved to decide what they were going to do about it. Harry still did not want to be brought to trial, and when he thought about it too closely, there was the impulse to scream and lash out with his magic against anyone who would take him anywhere against his will, but he could not make their decisions for them.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Addlington... He began the first letter, not letting his hand tremble, once again. He would convey as much sympathy as he could through the paper, but shaky handwriting would only give a false impression, either weakness or that he was striving to show that he grieved as much as they did, and of course he never could.
"Harry."

Harry turned around, blinking. Somehow, he had thought that Millicent and her father had left yesterday, but then, he had thought many things in his whirlwind haze of things to do after Draco had convinced him. He'd been on his way to McGonagall's office for something he dreaded more than writing those letters, though, so he slowed and nodded, grateful for the distraction.

"I suppose you've come to say farewell?" he asked, putting out his hand to Adalrico. The older man clasped it tightly, studying Harry's eyes as if he were struggling to see to the bottom of them.

"Of course not," said Millicent, looking vaguely surprised. "Not yet. We want to know what's going to happen to Belville, since he did betray the alliance we're a part of. And Zabini, Findarin, and Tipperary, of course," she finished, with a slight sniff. "I know that the danger was to you, primarily, Harry, and of course two of them won't be returning next year anyway, but Blaise is a different matter. Is he going to remain in Slytherin House, a danger to us all?"

Harry swore, but only inside his head. He had thought Blaise stood a chance of getting off easy, since Draco was still in no condition to

come out of the hospital wing and administer the “justice” he’d talked about the night before the battle. Snape was Head of Slytherin, and since Blaise was also one of his House, Harry hoped that sympathy might play opposite Snape’s concern for him. Looking at Millicent’s uncompromising eyes and her father’s stern face, however, Harry had the feeling that that wouldn’t be happening.

“I’m not sure yet,” was what he said, and turned towards McGonagall’s office. Millicent fell into step beside him. Adalrico limped behind, with that gait he’d perfected which didn’t deprive him of any dignity. Harry walked with his head up, never glancing sideways. He could feel Millicent’s gaze growing sharper and sharper all the while.

“You really don’t want anything to happen to him, do you?” she asked at last, in a soft, amazed tone. “Even after he nearly delivered you up to the Dark Lord and ended the war right then and there?”

“He snapped,” Harry said. “He was frightened. We all were. And he didn’t complete the crime. Surely attempted kidnapping matters less than kidnapping that actually happens?”

He saw Millicent turn from the corner of his eye so that she looked at her father. Harry didn’t glance back to see what Adalrico’s eyes and face might have been saying or not saying. His focus was forward.

Then Millicent’s hand clamped on his arm with a pressure he remembered, and knew not to resist. It was the kind she used when he wasn’t eating, or wasn’t sleeping, or otherwise doing something stupid. Reluctantly, Harry turned to meet her eyes.

“He betrayed us as well,” Millicent insisted. “All of them did—well, except the Death Eaters, but the Headmistress did say they’ll likely be turned over to the Ministry anyway, since they didn’t know much about the Dark Lord’s plans. Belville and the other students—Harry, we need justice.”

Harry inclined his head in a quick, shallow nod. “I’m trying to make sure there is justice,” he said. “And not vengeance.”

“You are too focused on that,” said Millicent, voice a soft growl. “In the name of justice, you would let people escape without punishment for what they’d done. You would have done it for your parents, and you’re going to do it here, unless someone else keeps you on track.”

“I would rather let a hundred criminals go free than see one innocent person suffer,” said Harry quietly.

“Even if those criminals cause suffering elsewhere?” Millicent pinched his arm, hard enough to make him wince. “Besides, Harry, have you considered that there’s something that applies to Belville and Blaise but not to the others? Belville was actually part of the alliance, and Blaise knows most of our secrets, both from his mother and from sharing a room with you and Draco. To protect ourselves, we can’t just turn them over to the Ministry. Even explaining their crimes would give our enemies weapons to use against us.”

“I’d considered that, yes,” said Harry. That was what was really making his guts churn. Justice wouldn’t be simple for either Belville or Blaise. It had to be kept private, and his allies were expecting him to handle it.

Millicent said, “I would be more than happy to punish them for you, Harry. And so would my father. And so would Hawthorn—”

“I know,” Harry interrupted her. “But I have to do it myself. I can’t ask any of you to take on a task I’m not willing to perform.” He pulled his arm free of her grasp and walked towards the gargoyle again. “Now come on. I don’t want to keep the Headmistress and our guests waiting.”

He tried to brace himself as he walked, for what he suspected his allies would ask of him. Now that Millicent and her father were there—and he knew that McGonagall had asked Arabella Zabini in—Harry suspected Hawthorn would be, as well.

Worse, he saw, when they rode the moving staircase up to the office. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy were there. To Lucius, things were very simple.

One took vengeance out of love. So he had gone, during the thirteen days when Draco was trapped in Hogwarts and he and Narcissa could only communicate with him thanks to Rosier-Henlin's spell, to the small house in Finland that sheltered the family of the Death Eater who'd hurt his wife. He'd exacted his own vengeance there. The walls had been blue when he began. They were purple when he was done.

One covered one's own tracks out of caution. So Fiona Mallory was enchanted into her own mind and left there, and wouldn't be able to come out of the trance again unless Lucius decided to release her.

And one made sure that the people connected to one's family, whether or not one loved them, were protected. That made for punishment. Lucius did not care what name he had to give this, vengeance or justice. Harry cared too much about words. What mattered was that Belville and young Zabini had to understand the reason it was unacceptable to betray or harm Harry. He had accepted joining to the Malfoy family. He was theirs. Draco loved him.

Lucius knew he might not be able to arrange their deaths, but he was going to arrange their suffering.

He watched Harry as the young man stepped through the door of the Headmistress's office, and halted, staring at him. A pity he was going to the Sanctuary for the summer, Lucius thought. He would have preferred to have the boys come to the Manor, where he could help them practice both with Dark Arts and with emotional control. Harry needed to get rid of his eyes that widened too easily, the expression that betrayed every emotion. Lucius knew he was capable of being inscrutable; he simply used the talent far too little.

"Mr. Malfoy," said Harry a moment later, and his eyes shifted to Narcissa, sitting in the chair beside Lucius. "Mrs. Malfoy."

"I told you to call me Narcissa, Harry," Narcissa said, rising to her feet and walking over to Harry. She still moved stiffly, a result of the pain curse she'd taken in the back during the battle. Lucius knew the one who had cast it was dead, but watching her made his hand want his

wand anyway. She stooped, put her hands on Harry's shoulders, and kissed him. She then whispered something into his ear that Lucius couldn't hear, but he had no doubt what it was. Narcissa had been ecstatically happy when Draco told them last night that he'd convinced Harry to go to the Sanctuary.

"Narcissa, then," said Harry, with a faint smile at her. He darted another glance at Lucius, but didn't ask what they were doing there, to Lucius's infinite relief. He must know that would have been stupid, and Lucius could not enjoy the thought of someone stupid being joined to his family. "Is anyone else arriving?" he asked the Headmistress.

McGonagall sat behind her desk, of course, prim and confident and in control. Lucius studied her, making sure his irritation was veiled. It was better than having Dumbledore as the head of the school—at least she was not a Legilimens and a Lord-level wizard—but she was still a Gryffindor, and she was still doing things that Lucius did not agree with. She had utterly refused to punish Blaise Zabini without his mother present, for example. Lucius saw the way her eyes softened as they rested on Harry, however, and suspected he might have found the fastest way to manipulate her.

"Professor Snape, of course," said McGonagall. "And Arabella Zabini." She hesitated for a long moment, then added, "Both Owen Rosier-Henlin and Hawthorn Parkinson waived their rights to be here. I think they needed more time to grieve." Harry nodded his understanding. "We've tried to find Mr. Rhangnara, but he's apparently in some distant part of the library, Rowena says. I think she approves of him. Miss Pemberley and Miss Apollonis have gone flying. And I did not think it would be a good idea for Mrs. Bulstrode to be here, given her temper."

Harry inclined his head. "I spoke to her about that already. She understood my reasoning." He turned abruptly, staring at the office door, and a moment later, it opened. Lucius nodded. Nothing wrong with his reflexes. But he needs them relaxed and blended with the rest of his life, so that he acts like that every day, and not only in the aftermath of battle. He will make a fine partner for Draco if he can but learn control. And when to use power.

Severus came in first, of course, his gaze traveling rapidly around the room to catalogue threats to Harry. Lucius exchanged nods with him, and hid his own amazement at this deep transformation in the man he had always known as one of the most vicious and violent of the Death Eaters. That Severus could have chosen a son—much less, the blood son of his worst enemy at school—was remarkable in and of itself. That he would consent to speak his love for that son aloud, even during a joining ritual that required such language of its participants, was the real sign of the change, however.

It interested Lucius. He could not help wondering if it made Severus weaker, particularly as the only vengeance he had taken for his son so far was through the legal channels of the Ministry. He would have to test Severus a time or two, and if he was weaker, then Lucius knew what to do.

Behind him came Arabella Zabini. She had wound all the gold and silver bells she possessed in her hair, it seemed, far more than were necessary to proclaim her skill as a Songstress. She walked with her head up, her beautiful face set in faint, smiling lines. She fully intended to stand against them all and walk out of here with her son intact, Lucius suspected. He felt a faint thrill of admiration at her courage and nerve, and contempt for her blindness.

“Please have a seat, Mrs. Zabini, Professor Snape,” said McGonagall, with a cordial nod. Her voice did not even cool on the woman’s name. Lucius had to respect that. He watched the expression on Arabella’s face as she sat down in the chair nearest the door and studied Harry. He could not make out all the disparate parts of it, but fear and anger were certainly there.

“The captured Death Eaters have been questioned under Veritaserum,” the Headmistress began, without preamble. “They were low-rankers and knew almost nothing of Voldemort’s plans. They will be turned over to the Ministry for prosecution.” Her hands folded over each other. “Unfortunately, that leaves us with four people whose cases are not so easy to settle. One, Mortimer Belville, wrote two letters to Voldemort under the name of the Serpent, destroyed the Hogwarts Floo connections, and was trying to poison or rot the food

in the kitchens when Harry captured him. The other three are students, Blaise Zabini, William Findarin, and Aidan Tipperary, who fed Harry, and other members of their House, the Draught of Living Death and tried to take Harry to Voldemort during the siege.”

“Where are their parents?” Harry asked abruptly. “The Findarin family and the Tipperary family, I mean? Shouldn’t they be here to see to their sons?”

McGonagall shook her head. “Both William and Aidan are seventh-years, Harry, and seventeen,” she said quietly. “Their parents cannot defend them from deserved punishment. As well, they were not part of our alliance, and I am afraid of what might be revealed in front of them. And Aidan’s family has already disowned him.”

Lucius made a mental note to send a congratulatory owl to the Tipperary family. It would be anonymous. No need to let them know who exactly approved of their actions, heroic and in defense of their family.

Harry took a deep swallow of air, then nodded and finally sat down, in a chair that faced Narcissa’s and was beside Snape’s. “I understand,” he murmured. “I—who are you going to bring out first, Madam?”

“Belville,” said McGonagall simply, and rose and went to a door in the far corner of the office, where, Lucius supposed, she had kept the prisoners.

He studied Arabella Zabini while they waited. The faint traces of deeper emotions had vanished from her face again, and she looked as calm and confident as a queen waiting on her favorite courtier to bring her the heart of her enemy. Her bells gleamed and softly rang as she tilted her head this way and that.

McGonagall came back with Mortimer Belville in tow. Lucius sneered at the man from the corner of his mouth. He had always despised the Belvilles, a once-poor pureblood family that had achieved prominence again only by litigation and “reclaiming” of monies they were supposedly owed for illegal use of their land. That they had taken some of those Galleons from the Malfoy vaults was only a side

reason to hate them. The main one was their standards of honor, or rather, lack of them.

When McGonagall released Belville from the Body-Bind, the man put his feet on the floor in a position that didn't allow him to stumble and stared at all of them with narrowed eyes and slightly tilted head. He had obviously prepared for this, Lucius thought, and might even have arguments that he thought would release him from punishment. He noted with infinite satisfaction that Belville's confident look faltered when his eyes passed over Lucius's face.

"I want to know why," said Adalrico, in a voice Lucius remembered from the day he had perfected the Black Plague spores. "None of the rest of us have had a chance to hear your confession yet, under Veritaserum or not."

Belville gave an arrogant shrug, his attention fastened on Harry now. "I wanted respect, notice. I wavered for a long time, but then I thought I was more likely to find that notice and attention in the service of the Dark Lord than in Harry's service. Obviously, I was wrong." He turned his palms up. "But can you punish me? I was only following the best pureblood traditions. When in doubt, choose the winning side."

"You endangered the rest of the children in the school," said Harry, voice without inflection, and so quiet that Lucius was glad he had come. The boy was going to let Belville out without so much as eating a scrap of his magic, he thought. It would be up to someone else to inflict proper punishment. "You destroyed the Floo connections. You went beyond simply offering some service to Voldemort in return for power. You suspected that he would attack earlier than Midsummer, didn't you? That's why you came so early."

Belville laughed easily. "Of course I suspected it. I can show you the very letter from Indigena Yaxley that suggested I'd want to join you as soon as possible." He cocked his head and smiled. "But you've already seen it, Harry. You know all about me. This is only for the benefit of those who don't."

Coward, Lucius thought. Sneaking traitor. He does not have the strength to stand up for his ideals. He noticed the way that Belville

looked towards his left arm, and Adalrico's, and Severus's, more than once. He thinks he will be forgiven because others of us have been. I wonder if he realizes that recent crimes committed against a private alliance are far different than crimes from fourteen years ago for which we've been publicly tried and found not guilty?

"I could forgive you," said Harry, voice still just as quiet, "if all you had done was put me in danger—tried to lead me into a duel with Voldemort, for example." Lucius frowned, displeased. That sounded much like Harry was going to try and forgive Zabini, Findarin, and Tipperary for what they had done. But that was not possible. Lucius would not let it happen. "But you suspected the early attack, and did not warn me. You were indirectly responsible for the deaths of over ninety of the students. Then you made sure that those students still alive could not flee the school in the way that would have been safest for them, with the wards against Apparition and Portkeys necessary to protect them from the Death Eaters. You would have poisoned or rotted our food and made the siege harder."

A pressure was growing in the room. Lucius felt it as a band of pain tightening around his temples. He noticed Severus sitting stiffly in his chair, and Adalrico and his heir sniffing discreetly, as if they caught the scent of a thunderstorm.

Harry's magic is building, Lucius realized, staring again at the boy, whose face was now calm and blank, reflecting nothing. He is much angrier than he shows.

Harry took a deep breath, and, with his next words, turned a corner in the path that Lucius had not thought he would turn.

"And I have been told," said Harry, voice thick and slow as treacle with reluctance, "that by trying to doom me, you tried to doom the war. If I am the only one who can defeat Voldemort, then I could not have gone down to him or surrendered my life, no matter what he did to compel me to it." He lifted his eyes, and the masks fell. Lucius could see his rage now, deep and cold as an ocean at the bottom of a cliff. "But he did not give up trying to compel me. And because of that, you are indirectly responsible for a decision that I would rather not have

made, a decision that has marked my soul and caused me to mercy kill children rather than leave them to Voldemort's sadism."

The world inside Lucius's head changed very quickly then. He had heard the story of what Harry had done, from Draco, and been sure it was confused somehow. Harry did not have the necessary hardness to choose death over life, a smaller sacrifice over a larger one, in circumstances like that.

Perhaps the Harry he had known did not. But the young man in front of him, who looked as though he had never cried, did. Lucius watched him carefully, and revised some assumptions about what might happen, what could happen, what would happen, with Harry as alliance leader and Draco's joined partner.

"I hope," Harry said softly, "that you like what you had a part in creating, Belville. I am inclined to give you a lesser form of the punishment that I gave Voldemort, who was most directly responsible. I am going to drain your magic." He flicked a glance around the room, whip-quick, dagger-sharp. "If my allies agree that this is a fitting punishment, of course."

Adalrico was grinning, looking younger than Lucius had seen him since he'd taken the Fisher King Curse. "No objections from the Bulstrodes," he managed to say through the grin.

Severus simply shook his head. Lucius could see the ferocity in his eyes, though, and changed another of his assumptions. Love appeared to have made Severus stronger, not weaker.

Well, it has done the same thing for Harry, so I cannot be too surprised.

Arabella said nothing; she was wiser than to try. Narcissa simply gave Harry a warm smile, as if he had received a dozen OWL's.

When Harry looked at him, Lucius chose a careful mixture of pride and cold approval, and let it through into his face. Harry inclined his head in an equally careful nod, and then turned to the Headmistress.

McGonagall smiled like a lioness crouching over a kill. “He hurt my children,” she said. Startled, Lucius thought he heard several other voices speaking with her own, at least two female and one male. “He deserves whatever you do to him, Harry, and this will hurt more than death.”

Harry nodded, and turned to Belville. It was only then, Lucius realized, that dear, dear Mortimer really believed he was about to become a Squib.

He was laughing desperately, backing up a step as if that would somehow lessen Harry’s determination. “Let’s think,” he said. “Let us think here. Let us be rational. I didn’t do much that hurt you in the end, Harry, did I? I was indirectly responsible for your decision and endangering the safety of your schoolmates. You said so. There’s no need to be so hasty. And I know that you don’t like draining people of their magic. You said so. You—“

Lucius felt the indefinable pull as Harry called upon his absorbere gift. The magic went draining from Belville like a wind, swallowed by Harry’s power. Harry didn’t move or make a sound the whole time. He simply watched Belville, until the end, when Mortimer opened his mouth and crumpled to the floor with a sound like a dying cat.

Then Harry turned away, a bit too swiftly, and Lucius caught a glimpse of revulsion on his face.

He still needs to be taught, then. Molded. Lucius’s own breathing was just returning to normal after the sight of a Dark pureblood—minor and annoying though the Belvilles were—becoming a Squib in front of him. He can still feel revulsion, and he should not. That gift is pure power, and nothing more than that. One does not feel revolted when one exercises power.

Harry did look back at Belville after a moment, and then narrowed his eyes. Lucius felt a brief flash of magic. He must have done something nonverbal, because the next moment, the huddled man looked up with wide eyes.

“What have you done to me?” he whispered.

Harry shook his head. "Put a Babbling Curse on you, tied to the secrets of the alliance. If you try to betray anything about us to someone who doesn't already know, then you'll simply spout nonsense, spoken or written. I won't Oblivate you; that would invalidate the point of draining your magic. And one set of Unbreakable Vows was enough. Good luck getting even Veritaserum to break through that curse, Belville." He smiled, and if he was still disgusted, he hid it very well. "Farewell, Mortimer. You can return to your home alone, I'm sure. After all, even Muggles and Squibs can use Floo powder."

"You don't—you don't understand," said Belville, standing. "I only chose the side I thought would win. It has nothing to do with personal enmity!" He was shouting now, the cords in his neck standing out. "I've only followed the best traditions of purebloods. It wasn't personal."

"And that only make you more worthy of contempt." Harry's voice was bored. "Good-bye, Mortimer."

In the end, Belville chose the wiser part of valor, walked over to McGonagall's fireplace, and cast the Floo powder in. Lucius didn't watch him. His eyes were on Harry instead.

It will be interesting to watch how he handles Zabini, Findarin, and Tipperary. He may not need that much help after all.

Harry felt exhaustion tugging at him as Belville vanished. It wasn't physical exhaustion, or magical; with the magic he'd just swallowed humming around his body in contentment, he felt able to learn the Animagus transformation on the instant, if he wanted to. It was mental and moral exhaustion. He hadn't enjoyed that. He'd come so far from enjoying it that he wanted to go back to his room and put his head under the pillow rather than do it again.

Or go to the hospital wing and curl up with Draco. That would be even better.

But he had three days, and three days only—more like two and a half, now—to make sure that everyone else thought him strong enough not to do stupid things during the summer. So he kept the iron mask on as McGonagall floated Blaise, Findarin, and Tipperary out of the room next to her office.

Blaise's face had frozen into a look of shock and dismay and horror. Harry flinched a bit as he looked at him, and then hoped no one had seen the flinch. It did hurt to think one of his own Housemates would betray him, but he understood all the reasons, all the motivations. Blaise had been frightened, and apparently there had been comments from his mother that made him think Harry might lose. Blaise was a Slytherin, a pureblood, and not above using Dark Arts. It was more likely Voldemort might spare his life if Blaise turned Harry over to him than almost anyone else.

Harry had spoken with Arabella Zabini by letter, and she had stated that she had never encouraged her son to betray him. Of course, she had also flatly refused to believe Blaise had done this in the first place. Harry kept his eyes on her as McGonagall released all three boys from the Body-Bind.

Sure enough, Arabella spoke first, her bells ringing as she tilted her head. "Blaise," she whispered. "Why?"

"You said that you missed me!" Blaise cried. His voice was hoarse from lack of water; the version of the Body-Bind McGonagall had used preserved its victims in utter stillness, but did nothing to remedy a throat already dry when the spell began. "You said that you thought Voldemort was strong! What was I supposed to think?"

"That I wanted you to stay safe," said Arabella. "That was always the only content of what I said to you, Blaise, every time we used the communication spell. I certainly did not intend for you to do something like this." The distaste in her voice was plain.

"But I was frightened," Blaise whispered, dipping his head. "That was all."

“A rather elaborate plan for someone who is frightened,” Snape drawled. Harry looked at him warily. McGonagall hadn’t allowed Snape to sit in on the meeting with Aurora and Philip yesterday because, as she had told Harry bluntly, she was afraid Snape would kill them. Now, at least, his guardian was keeping his hand from his wand. “You stole ingredients for the Draught of Living Death from my Potions stores. You used Dark Arts spells to cover your tracks. You used glamours to disguise the fact that it was Harry, and not merely a bundle of blankets, you carried. How did you plan to get through the wards?”

“I know a few spells to chew holes in wards, sir,” said one of the older boys. Harry thought it was Tipperary. His blue eyes were wide and terrified. “I would have repaired them, though! I promise! I didn’t want anything to happen to other people in Slytherin.”

“And you did not think that the Dark Lord might choose that moment to strike?” Snape’s voice grew lower. “That to get Harry through the wards, you would expose others to danger?”

“I—I—” Tipperary tried to find more words, and then seemed to give it up as a bad job. He lowered his eyes to the floor and shook his head.

The other one, Findarin, spoke up more heartily. “We did think the Dark Lord would let us live, sir,” he told Snape. “We’re all purebloods, and we can all use Dark magic.”

“Were you willing to take the Mark?” Snape asked.

Findarin’s swallow was loud in the silence. Harry wondered what his answer would be.

“I was,” he whispered at last.

Snape sneered. “I see that I have managed to teach you nothing in the seven years that you have been a student in my House, Mr. Findarin,” he said, mouth curling. “You were willing to be tortured, to crouch at the feet of a madman, merely to secure a little peace that would be ripped away from you the moment he decided he was tired of you. And did you know that the Dark Lord only accepts those who

come to him willingly, not to save their own hides? Strange. In his own way, the Dark Lord is honorable.” Snape’s mouth twisted further, and Harry thought his eyes no longer saw Findarin, Tipperary, or Blaise, but someone else, whose mistake had been much more permanent. “He despises traitors.”

“We—weren’t thinking,” said Findarin, gulping, and Harry was relived to see that that sound brought Snape’s eyes back from wherever they were looking.

“I would not dignify what occupied your head in that moment with even the name of not thinking, Mr. Findarin,” he snapped.

Harry narrowed his eyes. Snape really does need the Sanctuary just as much as Draco and I do. I wonder what he thinks he’ll do to avoid the Seers peering at his soul? Wear a glamour all the time? I don’t think there’s one strong enough to fool them.

“We really didn’t think,” Blaise spoke up then. Harry thought he was seeing this particular turn of his conversation as his best chance to get out of this trap. “We didn’t think. We were frightened. We acted like children. We would probably have got Harry to the doors of the entrance hall, and then not been able to open the wards and had to go back.” He laughed, a touch of desperation lingering behind the sound. Harry could see his hands opening and closing, though he had thought he had them hidden behind his back from everyone but his mother; it was obvious from the way his shoulders were moving. “I’m sorry for it. Can we go home now?”

“Why, Blaise?” Harry asked quietly. “Why you? Why were you the one to break?”

Blaise trembled for a moment, and then turned violently on him. Harry studied him in silence in the moment before he began to speak. Blaise’s face was almost gray, as if the fear lingered for him even now that Voldemort had been wounded and forced to withdraw.

“Because I never asked to share a House with the Boy-Who-Lived!” Blaise spat. “It was all right when you were just a powerful wizard, Harry, and when you had the Dark Lord’s enmity for that, and

Dumbledore's. And then your brother revealed you were actually the Boy-Who-Lived. You're the Dark Lord's main target. He's not ever going to stop coming for you, because he hates you. And anyone who stands beside you is going to suffer the same fate as your brother's friends would have, if he were the real Boy-Who-Lived." He wrapped his arms around himself. "I didn't ask for that," he whispered. "I didn't ask to be in the same House as you, the same room as you. I was going to be seen as your friend whether I was or not. And then my mother joined you because the Dark Lord angered her—not because she really approved of you or your cause, just because he stole her books—and I realized that I didn't have a choice. But at least I was still free to hold some distance from you in school. Voldemort wouldn't think the whole House was siding with you, I told myself. Slytherins act for themselves and their own interests.

"And then you were the Boy-Who-Lived." Blaise's breath hitched, and he closed his eyes. "He wasn't going to care who we were, what we wanted, unless I could prove to him once and for all that that I really didn't hold any loyalty to you by giving you up. I just—I didn't want to take the Mark. I didn't want to be hurt. I just wanted to go on living, and I wouldn't be able to do that if you were right there. I wanted to go to France. I told my mother that." He opened his eyes and gave Arabella a pleading, expectant look.

Harry didn't follow his glance. He just kept on looking at Blaise, and wondered if he had ever known him at all.

I think I did, he thought. But the good things in him were crushed by his fear. Just like Lily, come to that. Just like James. Just like Dumbledore, and Sirius.

Harry tasted bitterness for a moment. He hated crushed, wasted, wrecked lives, and he seemed to be surrounded by them.

He turned to Arabella then. She was sitting very straight, her hands clasped together.

"I understand if you no longer want me as part of your alliance," she told Harry. "But I do not think my son should be punished with death or Squib-hood. He did a stupid thing, a very stupid thing that I never

encouraged him in, and he is a child, still.” She gave Blaise a look that made him drop his eyes. “But he was plunged into the middle of a war against the Dark Lord that he never chose or asked for, and he did have good reason to think the Dark Lord would target him above others. I think he should be allowed to go to France, the way he wanted.” She stared at Harry.

“Would you go with him?” Harry asked her.

Arabella nodded. “I will not put him in Beauxbatons,” she said. “It is obvious he is unsuited for a school environment.” Blaise flinched. Arabella ignored him. “I would arrange to hire a private tutor, and play some part in his teaching myself.”

“How can I be sure that you would not tell anyone about the secrets you have learned as part of the alliance?” Harry asked her.

Arabella didn’t bat an eyelash. “Put the Babbling Curse on us as well. Bind us with an Unbreakable Vow. Make us swear on a dragon’s bone under Veritaserum. The method you use to make sure of our faith does not matter to me. What matters to me is that my son’s behavior has proven to me that he is conclusively still a child, when I wished to have an adult heir.” Blaise’s flinch went bone-deep this time, and still Arabella ignored him. “I must spend some time seeing to my family, vates. When, if ever, I think him fit to play a part in adult activities, then we will come and rejoin your alliance.”

Harry studied her for a long time. He had not hoped for a solution like this. He had thought Blaise’s mother would insist on his returning to Hogwarts next year and even staying in the same room as Draco and Harry, and Harry did not think he could have allowed that; he would never have felt safe again.

But this...

“I’ll choose the Babbling Curse,” he said. “It’s the least restrictive.”

Arabella slowly inclined her head. Only the extreme stiffness in her neck as she moved revealed how relieved she was, Harry thought. “Thank you, vates.”

Someone behind him made a noise of protest. Harry turned and followed it straight to Millicent. "He'll be out of the school," he told her. "He won't endanger you again. He won't be able to endanger us indirectly, either. It's for the best, Millicent. He's still a child."

Millicent understood that. Perhaps she understood better than he did, Harry thought, since she was also a Dark pureblood heir, and one expected to act like an adult from a very young age. The disgrace would be worse for Blaise than many other punishments. "Very well," she muttered.

"And if I say that I find this unacceptable?" That was Lucius, his voice light as frost. "If I say that I think someone who tried to kill the joined partner of a Malfoy heir deserves a worse punishment?"

Harry turned around and gave Lucius a smile as light as his voice. "I would say that you may wish to amend your wording, sir," he said, "lest your own punishment land a bit too close to home."

Lucius's face paled, though only for a moment. He was remembering Tom Riddle's diary, Harry knew, and what part he had played in hurting and weakening the joined partner of a Malfoy heir for most of a year. Satisfied that he got the point, Harry looked again around the circle, searching for other objections.

There were none. Harry nodded to Arabella. "Then you may go to France, Mrs. Zabini." He cast the Babbling Curse on both her and Blaise, and anchored it firmly to the notion of speaking about the alliance to anyone outside it. "I hope that you'll return with an adult heir."

"So do I," said Arabella. She rose and held out her hand, and Blaise at once scurried over to take her wrist. "Come, Blaise."

"I hope you recover your courage," Harry told him. Blaise kept his head down and didn't look at him. Harry could see a faint tremble racing up his spine.

When the door had shut behind the Zabinis, Harry faced Findarin and Tipperary again. "I don't know you," he told them. "You aren't my friends. But I can't shield you from what the law says should happen to you in a case like this, either, because you aren't underage."

"Indeed," said McGonagall. "They will be recorded as expelled from Hogwarts, not merely leaving, and their wands will be broken."

Findarin's face went pale, and Tipperary looked as if he would have liked to cry. Instead, he just nodded.

And, like that, it was done. Harry was glad. He wanted to go back to the hospital wing, and not only to see how Draco was doing.

First, of course, he had to wait and watch as their wands were broken. Both boys screamed when that happened. Harry winced, but kept his eyes straight ahead, knowing Lucius and Adalrico were both watching him.

When that was done, then finally, finally, he could go. He got to the door before Snape caught up with him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"A moment, Harry," he said. "I brewed Draco's latest potion before I came here. I will go with you."

So then he had to wait while Snape talked with McGonagall. Something about the Potions schedule for next year; Harry supposed that was only reasonable, since Snape would be gone most of the summer in the Sanctuary with them. Then they were on their way down the moving staircase. Harry pushed his face against the stone wall and let it scrape lightly on his cheeks to keep him awake, as well as hide his expression.

"Harry."

Harry tensed. "Sir," he acknowledged, without turning around.

"May I ask what finally decided you on going to the Sanctuary?" Snape's voice was distant, respectful.

Harry sighed. "Because I can't do this anymore," he said. He turned around and folded his arms over his chest. "I want to think about other things than the fate of the world, and the fate of werewolves, and the fate of the Ministry and the laws. I—every time I've tried to retreat, before, the world's always there, and it shoves itself in. And I'm not doing it good service like this, either, when every decision I make feels like it tears out a part of my soul. I'll do it better by resting for a while in a place where the outside world's not permitted to intrude." He lifted his shoulders and felt his mouth curve into a smile not far from a sneer. "You're always telling me to be a little selfish. I suppose I finally decided to listen."

Snape's hand closed over his shoulder, and he pulled Harry near him. Harry tensed himself to struggle, but the grasp didn't demand anything of him, and a moment later, it began to move, gently stroking over his neck and hair.

Harry tried to make himself relax. But now that justice, if one wanted to call it that, was dispensed, the list of things he had to do had reappeared in his head again, circling his thoughts like moons around a planet.

With a groan, he realized that he wouldn't be able to go and see Draco after all. He had to write to the MacFusty wizards, who owned the Hebridean Black sanctuary, and ask if they would watch out for Acies in her dragon form.

He tried to turn towards the dungeons when they came out of the moving staircase, and Snape's hand restrained him. Harry glanced up at him and shook his head. "I'm sorry. Something I have to do."

Snape said nothing. He just turned towards the hospital wing, tugging Harry along with him. It was not a hard clasp. Harry could have broken out of it if he truly wanted to.

He didn't truly want to.

He trailed behind Snape, and tried to tell himself that going to see Draco wasn't self-indulgent. After all, Draco needed Snape's potion,

and he needed Harry and Snape to check his mind again and make sure the damage was healing properly.

Draco was watching the doorway when they came in. His face lit with a wide smile the moment he saw Harry, and Harry told himself again it wasn't what he'd come to the hospital wing for.

But some of his weariness did leave him at the sight. Harry blinked his eyes open, muzzily. His sight remained blurry until he could retrieve his glasses, which had been lying on a low table not far from him.

He remembered sitting in a chair and talking to Draco. Someone must have moved him to this hospital bed when he fell asleep. From the look of the sky through the windows, it was deep night, and that had been hours ago.

Harry heard a soft flutter of wings and a hoot, and he reached up to find a tiny barn owl struggling to land on his shoulder. He shifted around so she could, then retrieved the letter she carried. It bore his name, both his first and the last name he'd shed, in unfamiliar handwriting.

He looked at the signature first when he opened it. It was from the Addlingtons, one of the families of the children he'd killed.

Then he looked at the top of the letter, and found that it contained nothing but insults, beginning with "you murderer."

Harry took a deep breath. He should read through it and witness what they said about him, in their anger and justified grief. Of course he should.

Instead, he crumpled up the letter, dropped the ball beside the bed—Snape or Draco could read it over later, if they wanted to, to insure there was nothing important there—and shook his head at the owl. "No reply," he muttered.

The owl stared at him for a long moment before she took wing again. Harry leaned back against the pillow and closed his eyes.

He was so tired. He hurt already.

He owed other people things. But there was no reason to torture himself. To do that would be to become the martyr Snape had warned him against becoming.

Maybe that's the point where people take advantage of me, and I've found it at last, Harry thought hazily, as his mind clouded over again, and he fell asleep with his glasses on.

Interlude: The Liberator's First Letter

June 25th, 1996

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

I hope you will excuse me writing to you like this, under a false name—almost a title, in fact—and without offering a way for you to owl me back. However, I fear for my life if my family finds out I'm writing you. My fear is no longer enough to hold me silent, but I cannot risk your owl.

My family has strong connections to the Order of the Phoenix, which I understand you're still trying to track down. I know only a few names myself, but I can suggest you look at:

-Auror Hector Dalrymple.

-Madam Malkin, who runs the robe shop of the same name in Diagon Alley.

-The reporter Gina de Rousseau, at the Daily Prophet.

Not all are deep in Order politics. Madam Malkin, I think, only permits her shop to be used as a gathering place for Order contacts. But all are bound in some way to the evolving web that once used Albus Dumbledore as its anchor and now uses another—a more formidable enemy, because his reputation is not widely known.

Tell me, Minister, have you ever heard of Falco Parkinson?

But you cannot owl me, and I cannot ask you to trust me at all until you have learned whether this information is good. Therefore, I will close this letter for now.

Please do not make an attempt to find out who I am. My father wants little to do with the wizarding world, and my mother, though she is more tolerant than my father, lets him have control over my life. I have reached the age of twenty without ever having left the house more than about once a month.

It is not only my own freedom I am fighting for, Minister, but that is a part of it.

The Liberator.

Chapter Ninety-Seven: The Third Greatest Is Loyalty

Rufus drummed his fingers on the desk and stared at the two letters that had come yesterday. To one, of course, he'd sent a reply at once, naming a time for today that he hoped would work. To the other, no reply was possible.

Who is the Liberator? Rufus picked up the parchment and smoothed it down again. He had used some of the more common charms to identify handwriting, and none of the Wizengamot members, nor someone else high-ranking in the Ministry, had written this. Rufus, of course, was not prepared to simply accept that the writer was what he sounded like—a young wizard living in a family with ties to the Order of the Phoenix—but he had assigned a few Aurors to look in on Madam Malkin's when they had time, and Tonks to observe Gina de Rousseau. Tonks might struggle to keep her feet at times, but she was, for obvious reasons, the best Auror in the Department at passing unnoticed.

"Sir?"

Rufus looked up. That was Wilmot, who'd been on guard outside his door. "Yes, Edmund?" Rufus made his voice as calm and welcoming as possible. Wilmot had been jumpy lately. Of course, he did seem to have a strong reaction to the moves that Rufus had made with the Wolfsbane, and they were drawing closer to the full moon again. Whatever troubles the man had in his past involving werewolves, the mood in the Ministry would only accent, not help him overcome.

"The room you designated as the Apparition location for the vates just twinged its wards, sir."

Rufus nodded. "Thank you, Edmund."

Wilmot lingered another moment. "There are two people with him, sir."

Rufus smiled. Soothing nervous Aurors was one of his areas of expertise. "I would be surprised if he had come alone," he said. "You may go to escort them up yourself, Wilmot. The notice-me-not

glamours the room placed on them should pass muster with most of the Department, though.” The room he’d described in his return letter to Harry, where he’d dropped the Ministry anti-Apparition wards in order to give him a chance to enter unnoticed, was a small interrogation room in the middle of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

“And you’re sure that you’ll be safe, sir?” Wilmot gazed at him, anxious lines curling around his blue eyes.

Rufus didn’t look at the far right corner of his office, but only because of practice. Percy Weasley sat there under a powerful glamour, ready to fire some of the spells he was picking up in Training if anyone unexpected came through the door. “I will, Wilmot. There’s Edges at one end of the hall and Grant at the other. I’ll survive.”

Wilmot jerked out a nod, and then turned and left. Rufus heard a snort from Percy’s corner. The young man didn’t seem to trust the older—but then, he was passing through the stage of the Training in which new Aurors were instructed not to trust anyone. Rufus had spent a month in absolute paranoia. Of course, his instruction had been Alastor. It was one of the many reasons Rufus mourned losing Moody to Harry. No one could put the alertness and constant vigilance in a young recruit’s head like Mad-Eye Moody.

“That will do, Weasley,” said Rufus. The glamour would fool the sight of almost anyone but Rufus himself, but it covered sounds less well. So Percy had to put up with folding his arms, leaning back, and sulking. Rufus returned his gaze to the door again.

He wondered what he would say to Harry. He wondered if the young man—he wouldn’t be a boy after the Daily Prophet’s reports on some of the happenings at Hogwarts—understood what he was walking into now, how the world had changed while he endured a siege and a battle and a mercy-killing.

A week ago, Rufus might have been too cautious to meet with Harry, even if he had been able to leave Hogwarts then. The world had exploded. The Daily Prophet was equally full of reports that painted

the students as innocent victims of a monstrous tyrant and ones that hinted that if Harry had been properly managed and the Boy-Who-Lived moved to a safe place while there was still time, then this wouldn't have happened. The British wizarding world was a cauldron of hysteria and panic that could overflow at any moment. Rufus considered it a true miracle that no parents had gone to the battlefield and tried to break through the Dark Lord's Death Eaters to rescue their children.

And then had come the battle that destroyed, so far as the press was concerned, every single Death Eater on the field. And Voldemort had vanished entirely from sight since then. And the majority of the children had come through alive, and some of them were all too eager to talk about how the great Harry had saved them all—or might have hurt them, but had instead saved them all.

So a new current had joined the brewing cauldron, and it was all moving so fast now that Rufus didn't think his enemies knew what to do any more than he did. The main difference was that most of them weren't used to surviving chaos in Slytherin House and in the Auror Office, and he was. He would balance better than they did, and react faster.

And it meant that there was an enormous explosion of goodwill building up for Harry, right alongside the enormous explosion of ill-will. Rufus intended to make him aware of that weapon, if he didn't know it yet.

"Someone here, sir," Percy said, a moment before the wards on Rufus's door twinged to let him know that Wilmot was here with their guests.

Rufus gave Percy an approving glance, which caused Percy to blush and duck his head. Young Weasley's special talent was outguessing wards, knowing a moment before they did what they were going to sense and say. His instructors had been excited enough by it that Rufus had had three separate reports about Percy's skill on his desk before the end of the day on which he'd first displayed it.

"Come in," Rufus called, before even the first knock could sound.

Wilmot opened the door and came first, of course, because he wouldn't want one of the visitors shooting a curse at the Minister. Rufus wasn't sure his caution wasn't justified. The figure walking on one side of Harry, he saw as the wards on his office removed the notice-me-not glamour, was Severus Snape. On the other came Peter Pettigrew, the innocent man Rufus's own Department had imprisoned in Azkaban, the result of Dumbledore's concerted, and successful, attempt to fool them all.

Rufus was torn between the urge to apologize every time he saw Pettigrew and the urge to interrogate him again until he admitted the Aurors had been right all along and that they hadn't been blinded by the emotion of the night the Dark Lord fell. He stood to nod to both of them, and extend his hand to Harry.

"Harry," he murmured.

Harry nodded to him and leaned forward to clasp his wrist. He was pale, the circles under his eyes so pronounced that Rufus didn't think the glasses would distract anyone's attention from them, but he looked balanced and calm—determined to make it through, really. His magic hummed around him with a strength that made Rufus feel clear-headed and eased just being in his presence. That was a weapon, too, though Rufus was not sure if Harry would see it as such.

"Thank you for making time to see me today, Minister," Harry said formally, and sat down in one of the three chairs Rufus had had Wilmot bring in earlier. He'd guessed three visitors, though his only true basis for that had been the fact that Harry had come with Severus Snape and Remus Lupin the last time he arrived. Rufus congratulated himself on his foresight. "I wasn't sure if you would. I know that the Wizengamot has largely tied your hands on the werewolf issue."

"They've tied my hands," Rufus agreed, and then waved his wand beneath his desk. Wards closed around the room, making what was said inside inaudible even to the ears of Edges and Grant, the Aurors waiting in the hall. It was a dangerous precaution; at least once a Minister had been assassinated behind such soundproof wards. But

Rufus needed to make sure that no Wizengamot spy, or ordinary citizen doing what he thought was the best thing for the Ministry he served, could hear this and pass it on. "Or they think they have. Your Midsummer battle upset the political balance of absolutely everyone, Harry."

Harry tensed, but lifted his eyebrows politely. "Oh?" Beside him, his guardian put his hand on his wand. Rufus gave him a sharp glare, and Snape lifted his hand, though he was scowling. The man needs more lessons in how to be a Slytherin, at least when his son is in the room, Rufus thought, and turned back to Harry.

"Yes," he said. "Our world is more intensely interested in you than they have ever been, Harry."

Harry frowned. "Because I'm the Boy-Who-Lived?" Rufus nodded his approval. The boy was at least testing out the limitations and basis of his new power, rather than believing the first person who told him it existed.

"Not only because of that," he said. "Because you fought your first great battle against You-Know-Who and survived, Harry. You did more than survive. You drove him from the battlefield. Is it true that all his Death Eaters are dead?"

Harry shook his head. "Indigena Yaxley managed to get away, and there are a few who were never confirmed dead. It's hard to tell though, sir, since so many of them were recruited in other countries."

Rufus smiled. Headmistress McGonagall had informed him of the way Voldemort tended to recruit Death Eaters in some of those other countries. He was looking forward to using the information she'd owed him. "And how many Death Eaters would you say were on the battlefield, Harry?"

Harry's headshake this time was slower. "Over five hundred, sir, but once again, exact numbers are hard to come by."

"Over five hundred will do," said Rufus. "It's the number the Daily Prophet's been reporting, as a matter of fact. Over five hundred

Death Eaters, Harry, and only a few of them might have survived.” He leaned forward. “And Voldemort?”

“Wounded,” said Harry quietly. “I cut a hole in his magical core. Whenever he tries to use his power, it will slip away from him, and the same thing will happen to any magic he absorbs.”

Rufus laughed. Harry frowned at him. “I don’t understand, sir,” he said. “You’re speaking as if I have a chance at winning supporters. There must be people who hate me for what I did at the siege.” He was pale, but he held Rufus’s eyes. “Philip Willoughby and Aurora Whitestag have already contacted you, I suppose?”

“They have,” said Rufus. “Frankly, Willoughby’s case will only convince zealots. Whitestag is more of a problem, because she sounds rational, but there are ways to combat even that, Harry. Do you want me to tell you what they are?”

Harry nodded. His eyes were still wide, blinking occasionally. Rufus stifled the urge to laugh again. He really doesn’t know what I’m getting at. I should explain it now, before it gets him further confused.

“You’ve saved lives as well as taken them,” said Rufus quietly. “You made sure that Hogwarts came through the battle intact.”

“There were also the wards, and Headmistress McGonagall, and Auror Moody—” Harry began, his face vaguely alarmed.

“That will matter only to the detail-obsessed,” said Rufus. “You must understand, Harry, that while there will be people who look at your mistakes and hate you for them, there are others who accept you so thoroughly as the Boy-Who-Lived that you are their hero. And now they have something to venerate you for other than the destruction of Voldemort as a baby, or even turning back the storm on Midwinter, which not many of them know the details of. There’s a new mythology growing around you already, Harry.”

Harry sighed. “Minister, I’ve been through this before. When the Prophet was calling me the Young Hero last year, it didn’t prevent them from printing stories that called me an abuse victim and weak

for it, or Argus Veritaserum's articles that said I wasn't being true to my ideals."

"This groundswell is stronger," said Rufus. "You think, or only believe, that the other one must be the strongest, Harry. That would have something to do with the guilt you're carrying?"

Harry gave a slashing nod. Snape turned around and stared at him in concern. Work on him this summer, then, Rufus thought, hoping the other man would hear his thoughts. Remind him that just because he has done evil does not mean he has done no good—and that becomes especially true if we assume that it is good and evil in the eyes of other people.

"There are supporters who will come to your side," said Rufus, "vindicated for their faith in you, thrilled to the depths of their beings by what you have done in this battle, and rejoicing in their freedom when they hear about You-Know-Who's wound."

Harry's face grew impossibly more distressed. "And they'll be following me, sir, for all the wrong reasons," he said. "I don't want to be branded a hero because I'm also branded a killer."

Rufus shook his head. "Whatever else, whoever else, you want them to follow, Harry, your best bet of getting them to follow that ideal or that person is to use the power you have. They'll listen to you because you're the Boy-Who-Lived, first, and because you won this battle—rather resoundingly. And as for admiration of killing..." Rufus turned his hands upward. "Our society is wounded and sick at the core, perhaps. But once again, to heal that you need to approach it from the inside out, unless you want to use your magic to force others to act better."

Harry's face had actually changed on his last words, so that he looked something like thoughtful. He glanced up at Rufus and nodded when his speech was done. "I—thank you, Minister," he said. "You've given me something to think about." He leaned forward. "I'm afraid I won't be able to put your advice into motion right away, though. I'm planning to leave for the summer."

“And go where?” Rufus asked.

Harry exchanged a look with Snape and then with Pettigrew. Snape shook his head. Pettigrew nodded.

Harry moved his hand in a quick, sweeping gesture that created a box of white light around himself, Snape, Pettigrew, and the Minister. That shut Wilmot and even Percy out; Rufus was certain Harry had noticed Percy from the moment he walked in. Inside the box, Harry leaned closer.

“I have a sanctuary to retreat to for the summer, sir,” he said. “I deliberately made Voldemort’s defeat as crushing as possible so that I wouldn’t have to rush back the moment he stirred and try to prevent a raid or confront him. Of course, I didn’t anticipate how—boiling—the wizarding world would be because of things like my mercy killing.” He paused a moment. “We’re going to tell other people that I’ve been removed from Hogwarts so that I can train how to kill Voldemort, and that should satisfy Whitestag and her cronies for a time. I’ll be in a place where I can’t quickly receive owls, though, so I won’t be able to keep up with what changes here myself.”

Rufus blinked for a moment. Then he said, “And what will you do at the sanctuary, Harry?” He could not imagine that there was anything Harry would consider more important than his duty to the wizarding world, or, at least, his duty to the magical creature part of it.

Harry gave him a small, fragile smile. “Heal, sir,” he murmured. “I haven’t healed the wounds from my parents’ abuse completely yet, though I’ve tried. But here—there are simply too many things happening, too many causes that need my help. I’m going away for two months of rest so that, by the time I return, I can be all the stronger for handling them.”

Rufus stared at him. For a long moment, the words he wanted wouldn’t emerge from his throat. Then he said, “You haven’t healed?”

Harry shook his head. “I haven’t had time, sir. Really, no need to look so surprised.” He chuckled. “I would be surprised if you have the time to attend weekly sessions with a Mind-Healer in St. Mungo’s, either.”

"I have made the time when I needed it," said Rufus, "in the wake of the Capto Horrifer, for instance. Many other Ministry employees did the same thing, Mr.—Harry." He studied the young man in front of him again. Yes, many things made sense now. What was absolutely astonishing was that he had managed to walk into the office under his own power, in Rufus's opinion.

Harry blinked and hitched up a shoulder. "Then I suppose it's time, Minister," he said. "I didn't know the wizarding world and the shifts in opinion were quite that violent, though. I did want to tell you I would be out of reach." He sat back in his chair and took a deep breath. "Can I count on you to manage the brewing cauldron for me while I'm gone, and try to keep it from spilling over?"

"I would prefer to manage it for you," said Rufus bluntly. In the name of Merlin, I would have ordered him to take a rest, as I can do with my Aurors, if I thought it would do any good. "I know how to use the power of your name better than you do, Harry, and it seems that I am also more willing to do so."

Abruptly, Harry frowned. "But I shouldn't make you do something I would be unwilling to do myself—" he began.

"Harry," Snape hissed, leaning closer to his ward. Rufus watched in interest as Harry turned and looked up at him, his attention shifting from polite and focused to utterly intent. So this is what he looks like when he trusts someone enough to really listen to him. "You need to be protected, as much as possible, from the shrill invective the press will hurl at you. The Minister is offering to do it. When someone offers to do something like that for you, the proper course is to thank them."

Harry opened his mouth in what looked like the beginning of an argument.

"And you have promised by blood and breath and bone to go with Draco to the Sanctuary tomorrow," Snape finished.

Harry shut his mouth. For a long moment, he chewed his lower lip instead, and then he nodded firmly and turned back to the Minister.

"I thank you for the offer, sir," he said. "It has to be done, and I won't be here to do it." For a moment, he looked wistful. Rufus knew that look all too well. Some of his more work-addicted Aurors had worn it at times. Harry was trying to think of some way around the oath, or, at least, of how he wished there was a way around the oath.

"All of that is true," said Rufus, before Harry could really manage to change his mind. "We'll begin with the Boy-Who-Lived proving himself again, with the announcement of Voldemort's real condition, and with the deception that you've gone away to train. All of that will provide a good weapon, and answer to those who think that you must do more. I would like to see what 'more' they mean, after the Midsummer battle."

Harry blinked as if waking from a dream, and then nodded slowly. "I am also trying to bring the werewolf problem to a resting place, Minister," he said. "I've informed Loki that I'll side with the Ministry if he bites more people, and with him if that's the reason the Ministry is hunting his pack. And of course I can always side with werewolves who are not part of his pack. For as much chaos as they've caused, Loki's group is small, I know."

"I would not be so sure of that," said Rufus. "We've heard of Loki for years from rogue werewolves. I thought him a myth, but if you've met him in the flesh—"

"And received a letter from him." Harry nodded. "And, yes, it's always possible that he commands more people than I know about, but he does not speak for all the werewolves in Britain. Even if he did, then I would work for equal rights, and then make sure that werewolves were tried for biting the unwilling, or for murder if they killed their victims. They can't live both inside and outside our society, Minister, protected by our laws when they want to be and then doing things that are only legal by their own. Sooner or later, they'll have to make compromises."

Rufus found himself smiling. When Harry was animated, he was a sight to see. And this shine in his eyes was probably what made people ignore the dark circles under them, and so this was a double-

edged weapon. Rufus reminded himself to see clearly. Husbanded, Harry's fire might burn for a long time, and accomplish the reforms that he so wanted to see accomplished. But it could burn out too easily.

"Understood, Harry," Rufus murmured. "And you will get no argument from me." He hesitated a moment, but he could not see Pettigrew and Snape spreading this any more than he could Wilmot, and Harry deserved to know. "I have arranged for confiscated Potions ingredients to be turned over to a cousin of mine," he told Harry. "He loves to brew, but is more interested in pure creation than credit or money; the moment he is done working on one potion, he moves on to the next. He has always wanted to brew Wolfsbane, and it's complex enough to keep him happy for a time. I've been distributing Wolfsbane to those registered werewolves too poor to afford it—on the quiet, of course, since the Wizengamot would have a fit if they knew."

The shine in Harry's eyes became so bright that Rufus found a trace of the impulse to follow quivering in his body. This was the leader Harry's allies had found, then, if only for a glimpse, the young man who would risk everything he had for someone else, whose greatest commitment was free will, who offered gratitude and admiration freely but couldn't see why others offered it to him. This man was looking at Rufus as if he'd just announced that the Ministry was repealing all the anti-werewolf laws, and Rufus had to fight to keep from simply grinning and basking in that gaze.

And this is why he's so dangerous, he thought, to temper himself. I can't let my own admiration for him and all he's survived blind me to the fact that he might not always want what's best for the Ministry. In the case of the werewolves, that's certainly true. I can't do things for his approval. I can't take him as my own leader.

"Thank you, Minister," said Harry quietly. "This means more to me than you can know. I know you don't—like werewolves." He picked his way among the words as if he thought he would step on a bladed one.

"I don't like 'em," Rufus said, "because almost all the ones I see are rogues who've bitten or killed someone, and only a few are horrified about it. But I think I am coming to see that not all werewolves are the same. Not even all Death Eaters are the same." He pointedly didn't look at Snape and Pettigrew, because that would have been too easy. "And I can help 'em—the ones who did register, the ones who try to obey our laws and are treated like shit because of it."

Another thoughtful look came across Harry's face. "You know," he murmured, "there might be some people I could introduce you to, Minister, when I come back."

"When you come back, Harry," said Pettigrew firmly. And either he had more of a hold over Harry or his semi-argument with Snape had taught him better, because he lowered his eyes and nodded sheepishly.

"That's true," he said, and looked up at Rufus, extending his hand again. "Thank you, for everything."

"You're more than welcome." Rufus clasped his hand again, and looked into his eyes, and made himself see the shine and the dark circles and the danger that lurked there—danger all the greater because Harry would never know for certain who was following him for his ideals and who for his person. "Good luck in your healing, Harry."

Harry nodded once, and then dismissed the ward that had protected the latter part of their conversation. Wilmot left with him and his guards to escort them back to the Apparition point.

Rufus sat back down and reflected for a moment. Then he felt a dangerous grin widening across his face.

That conversation gave me ideas. He nodded at Percy. "Fetch me the records of Amelia Bones's employment," he commanded.

Percy blinked and frowned even as he bent to fetch them. "Sir?"

"I want to find out how long it's been since she's taken a mandated rest period," said Rufus, and exchanged a shark-like smile of delight with Percy.

Harry had noticed it before, but now he was sure of it. Wilmot was nervous, enough that he could hardly bear to walk down the corridor beside them. Harry could see it in his slightly widened eyes, of course, the way any human wizard would display it, but also in the way he showed his teeth when someone called suddenly from behind an Auror desk. Remus had shown the same signals when he felt upset enough.

"What's the matter?" Harry asked at last, using another small ward so that only he and Wilmot could hear what the man would say.

Wilmot bent down and whispered, "I have some reason to suspect that Loki is visiting the Ministry today."

Harry knew his back had stiffened, but he forced himself to keep walking. "You have some reason?" he asked at last.

"I was once more in contact with the London packs than I am now," Wilmot murmured. "I gave that up a few years ago, when Loki started to have more dominance than I was comfortable with, but I still passed along word of laws that affected us, and other possible problems, the moment I learned of them. And now Loki, under the impression that that makes me loyal, told me that he might find his way into the Ministry a few days before the full moon."

"He intends to bite a target here?" Harry demanded, feeling his magic twine and tighten around him. He caught a glimpse of Snape trying to break through his ward, but he was too angry to care.

"He does," Wilmot said. "Or at least he hinted that, and I am intelligent enough to translate the hints, I think."

Harry restrained the impulse to pick up one of the Auror desks and throw it. "Who?"

"The Minister."

Harry nearly stopped walking and demanded to know why Wilmot hadn't told Scrimgeour, but he understood in another moment. A threat to the Minister's life would result in questioning under Veritaserum. Wilmot would explain, willingly or unwillingly, how he got the information. And the knowledge that he was a werewolf himself would result in his being sacked, left unable to know anything about future assassination attempts on the Minister.

"Do you know where he might have come in?" Harry breathed.

"Unfortunately, no," said Wilmot. "He can use that damn pack magic to vanish, you know. He'll be especially careful since this is just a scouting mission. And I think—"

Harry caught a blurred glimpse of pale hair as something appeared off to the side and moved at him. It was Loki, Harry knew, and he was coming with strength and speed that Harry didn't think he could match, in those few moments of numb surprise.

Wilmot moved at the exact same moment. He seized Loki's arms and whirled, slamming him into the wall and holding him there. Harry heard gasps from the Aurors around them, and dismissed the ward that had concealed his and Wilmot's conversation. He looked at Peter.

"Stall them," he insisted. "Tell them that this is just a grieving parent who wants justice for what was done to his children at Hogwarts."

"But what about—" said Peter.

"No time," said Harry, and then shifted nearer to Loki and Wilmot. Snape was coming behind him, his steps slow as death. Harry reached back and gripped his wrist once, asking, pleading, for him to hold on to his hatred and not fling a spell. It was especially important since they were in the Ministry and a Dark Arts curse would bring the Department of Magical Law Enforcement down on them like a pack of rabid wolves.

What an appropriate metaphor, Harry thought. Then Snape squeezed back, and Harry was free to move over to the little scene against the wall, while Peter explained matters to the Aurors and made excuses

for the sudden presence of the Boy-Who-Lived in a calm, carrying voice.

Loki was staring at Wilmot with his teeth bared. This close to the full moon, Harry thought, he looked feral. His teeth were slightly longer, and his pale hair wild. And perhaps it was just the effect of shock at Wilmot's betrayal, or not being in control of the situation as he had been when he confronted Harry by the lake, but he looked far more vulnerable, too.

Wilmot had his teeth against Loki's throat, lightly scraping it as he spoke. Harry had to use magic to sharpen his ears so that he could hear.

"—gave my loyalty to someone else, Loki. I won't allow you to hurt him."

"How would you justify killing me?" Loki whispered. "Now, here?"

"I don't have to justify killing you," Wilmot said. "I have to justify manhandling you, and that's all. You would have to justify lunging at the Boy-Who-Lived, and I don't think you can do that right now."

Loki stared at Wilmot, the amber of his eyes growing deeper. Wilmot laughed, a sound that trailed off in a growl.

"Do not try that charisma shit on me, Loki." He snapped his teeth again, this time taking a flap of skin and worrying it between them, to make his point. Harry could feel Snape breathing hard behind him, and reached back to grip his wrist again. "I am not a member of your pack."

"I did not come alone," Loki said, already more relaxed, moving back into the calm, dominant persona Harry remembered of him. "Members of my pack are scattered throughout this room. They could bite. And the bite of a werewolf even in human form can have—unpredictable effects."

Wilmot smiled, and Loki let out a little gasp of pain. "They won't move while you're in danger, Loki," he said.

“They will go from here if you put me in Tullianum,” Loki countered, his head tilting back as though he were inviting Wilmot to tear his throat open, “and bite as many others as they can on the full moon. They’ll run without Wolfsbane.” His eyes shifted sideways to Harry. “And he won’t be here to stop it from happening.”

“Will you refrain from biting those victims if we let you go?” Harry asked. Behind him, he could hear Snape sucking in a deep breath and then saying nothing. He was grateful. His mind was swarming with the consequences of this, if Wilmot did arrest Loki. Loki would not only betray Wilmot’s position in the Aurors—there was nothing to stop him—but his pack would go mad, and for all Harry knew it would begin a rebellion or a full-out war, instead of a biting of chosen victims.

“You will have my word,” said Loki. “We have chosen the Minister for this moon cycle.” He was speaking more and more shallowly as Wilmot’s teeth pressed closer into the skin of his throat. “Or we had, until I saw you. I thought you might appreciate being adopted fully into our pack, vates.”

Harry ignored that, and turned to Wilmot. “Can we trust him if he gives his word?”

“We can,” said Wilmot, “since his pack is here. An alpha lives or dies by his sworn word.” He was trembling with frustration, staring hard at Loki. “I wish there was more we could do,” he said. “There must be.” Loki winced as Wilmot’s teeth made a faint stream of blood trickle down his neck. Harry heard a chorus of phantom growls, and could almost feel the pack pressing closer.

And Harry knew what more could be done.

He stepped forward, and let his magic flap and flash around him, breaking free from its confines. Loki stared at him at once. There was something deep within those amber eyes that was more wizard than werewolf, Harry thought, even on the days of the full moon, and he knew the other man recognized the strength of his magic.

“This is what you are up against,” said Harry softly. “This is what you have pushed me into.” He stared steadily at Loki. “I will have a promise from you now. You will swear that your pack, including you, will make no attacks on chosen victims for the next two months, until September’s full moon.” That was for as long as he would be in the Sanctuary, and as much as Harry thought he could reasonably ask for without triggering either the pack’s protective instincts or Loki’s independent spirit, to the point that he would insist on dying as a sacrifice just to avoid giving that promise.

“And if not?” Loki asked.

“Then I will drain your magic now,” said Harry. He felt his mind shifting again, moving into that crystal-clear place he had been when he killed Dumbledore. “I know how to behead a pack. Your power base will snap and scatter.”

“It will mean open war,” Loki said.

“So does this,” Harry hissed at him, dropping almost into Parseltongue. “You consider me bound, Loki. And it is true that my oath to the werewolves and my vates commitments bind me from simply killing you the moment you make trouble, or trying to constrain you never to bite anyone again, even in self-defense. I have to try to leave your free will free, and your people have suffered enough that I do not want to take a strong leader who could better their lives from them. But when you push me into a corner, I will strike back.” He was shaking, he could feel himself shaking, but his magic was also getting ready. A black snake appeared, winding around his neck, and hissed at Loki on its own. “I have to leave, I am bound to that, and I have to protect the free will of both the werewolves and the Ministry; I am bound to that. But if it is the only way to keep both oaths, I will accept the utter destruction of one pack. You have proven impenetrable to reason so far, Loki. Can you learn it?”

Loki kept looking at him as if seeing him for the first time. Then, finally, he said, “You—you are trying.”

He can learn. Perhaps. But Harry remembered the werewolves with their teeth on Draco’s and Snape’s and Moody’s throats, and held

himself wary. "I am trying," he said. "And I must leave tomorrow, and I do not want to leave the wizarding world in chaos. Understand. I am the most powerful friend you have at the moment, since you have worked so hard to alienate the Wizengamot, and panic is brewing in the rest of the wizarding world. I will not be here. That means that, yes, you might get away with biting innocent victims. On the other hand, the Ministry might hunt your pack to death in the meantime. I won't be here to prevent that, either. I tried to explain this in the letter. I see little evidence that the words even cracked the wax in your ears."

Loki said, "I will swear, on my word as alpha, that neither I nor anyone else in my pack will bite except in self-defense until September's full moon."

Harry nodded sharply and stepped back. The arrogance was already returning to Loki's voice. He knew he could not push.

Loki could, though. He turned to Wilmot with a lazy smile as the Auror lifted his head and murmured, "The Minister might receive an anonymous owl, you know, a few days in the future, telling him about a certain werewolf in his staff."

"And then they would question me with Veritaserum, to determine how I avoided detection for so long," Wilmot said, his voice also casual. "And I would tell them everything I knew, of course, including the location of a certain London pack. And all the weaknesses I knew in that pack. Tell me, Loki, does Gudrun still have a bad left leg?"

Loki began a bubbling snarl in his throat. Harry let the black snake rear up and hiss again, while the air around him grew cold enough to make their breath steam. Loki glanced at him and cut the snarl off.

"A truce," he said. "For now." His eyes were locked on Harry, shining brilliantly. "Vates," he said.

Wilmot backed away and said, "That is enough. You have a right to your anger and your grief, and since you didn't actually succeed in assaulting Harry, then I suppose he won't want to press charges." Harry shook his head in relief; Wilmot must have heard the story

Peter was telling. "But you must leave the Ministry now. I will escort you out, personally." He gripped Loki's elbow. Loki went tamely, muttering. The other Aurors sat down behind their desks, and, Harry assumed, the rest of the pack followed their leader.

Harry closed his eyes. He felt sick and shaky, even as the snake around his throat dissipated into mist and flowed back into him. He was caught between two conflicting and equally strong impulses. One was the impulse to flee to the Sanctuary right now, before anything else could happen.

The other was to stay here and make sure that nothing else like this could happen, that people kept talking instead of fighting.

Snape's hand closed on his shoulder and steered him firmly the few remaining steps towards their Apparition room, the expression on his face likely preventing the Aurors from clustering around either to insult him or thank him. Harry sighed and shook his head as he walked. He couldn't stay. The oath he'd sworn would start choking him if he tried.

He had to wonder, though, if even the Sanctuary would be able to keep him from thinking about the werewolf problem.

Chapter Ninety-Eight: G.U.T.O.E.K.O.M

Harry sighed and sat back against the wall as he picked at his breakfast. The letter from the MacFusty clan had finally arrived, and they'd reassured Harry that they'd seen Acies settling on a barren rock in the middle of the Hebrides, probably drawn by the presence of their Hebridean Black dragons, and going to sleep. It was the starvation sleep, as one of the handlers called it; she would be ravenous when she woke, but it was likely she wouldn't wake for a good two or three months. The MacFusty wizards had been Dragon-Keepers for so long that they retained some records that were—or purported to be—about the British Red-Gold. Harry trusted them to keep an eye on her, at least.

He glanced at his breakfast and picked at it again. It still looked as unappetizing as it ever had. He supposed he could have waited until someone else woke up so that they could provide the conversation to season the food, at least, but he hadn't wanted to. He hadn't slept last night, so it had seemed easy to go to the kitchens, ask for the necessary components to make a sandwich from the house elves, and then retreat up to the top of the North Tower.

Waiting for the MacFusty letter had been only part of the reason for his insomnia. There was also the anxiety about leaving the wizarding world for so long, now that he was on the verge of doing so.

Can I justify abandoning everything I have to do?

Harry picked up the Daily Prophet lying beside him and gave it a good shake out. The wind promptly tried to tear it from his hand. Harry snorted and leaned his back on the stones of the Tower, turning so that he could read the headlines in the fall of early sunlight. A few days past Midsummer, the days had started to shorten, but not by much as yet.

YOU-KNOW-WHO WOUNDED

The headline led off a front-page story by Rita Skeeter. Harry was happy she had got to write it, at least. He skimmed through the story, noting with a faint smile that Skeeter declared as true and proven things that most other reporters hedged around with words like

“alleged.” Either she was just that confident, or Scrimgeour had contacted her as the chosen message-bearer. Or perhaps she had been a beetle inside his ward yesterday afternoon, but Harry doubted that. Scrimgeour’s wards had been tight enough to identify an Animagus.

Five hundred Death Eaters dead...You-Know-Who wounded and unable to command the field...Boy-Who-Lived to undergo training during this summer...

Harry wondered for a moment if he should contact the Minister and make sure he’d told Skeeter these details, then shook his head. He’ll see the article, and if he thinks she needs a talking-to, he’ll be the one to give it.

He folded the paper, half with his hand and half with magic, and set it aside. As he did, he saw a shiver of movement from the Tower stairs. His hand turned over automatically, gathering magic.

“I am not welcome to sit with you?” Every tone in Argutus’s voice was wounded.

Harry laughed in spite of his mood and held his left wrist out. Argutus flowed over and coiled his neck around it at once, flicking his tongue out in a contented motion. “Snakes don’t sit,” Harry murmured, leaning back so that the Omen snake’s scales could feel the sunlight.

“Excuses,” said Argutus, even though the Parseltongue word he’d used to mean “sit” translated more like “coil in a relaxed posture.” “I think that you have spent too much time alone today.”

Harry opened his eyes with a frown at that. “It’s only six-something, Argutus.” He could have cast a Tempus charm, but he was enjoying the drape of the snake around him too much to make an effort to move. Argutus had grown large enough and long enough to lap over his shoulders and arms and curl the tip of his tail around his waist. “I haven’t been alone that long. Besides, no one else is awake.”

“You were awake all night.”

Harry remembered, then, that Argutus had taken to the convention of days starting at midnight with extraordinary enthusiasm. He thought humans were very clever to have figured out a point in the dark when a new day could begin. Harry had found him a few times during the siege studying clocks.

“That’s true,” he said, and let himself yawn widely, since his right arm was pinned by Argutus’s shifting coils anyway. A year old now, Argutus was close to full-grown if not already there. “But I’ll rest tonight, Argutus. We’re going to the Sanctuary. That means that we can rest as long as we like for two months, and no one will be nagging us to get out of bed.” It was what he imagined the Sanctuary to be like, at any rate. Since all he really knew of the place came from Vera’s vague descriptions and his one venture into Peter’s mind to remove the phoenix web, Harry didn’t know if the Sanctuary was all white beds, or if that was only one room of it, or even only a representation, without any anchor in reality.

“You need to rest some more. And you need to not be alone.” Argutus sounded as bright and determined about the matter as Millicent had—

Or, no, the comparison was not quite right. Reluctantly, Harry let himself turn to thoughts he’d been avoiding. Argutus sounded a lot like Pansy, when one got right down to it.

“I’ll have the time to rest when we get to the Sanctuary,” he argued, standing. “And I don’t think the Seers will leave me alone.”

“Neither will I.” Argutus adjusted himself so that his head still rested on Harry’s left wrist, but his tail was wrapped more securely over his waist, and the majority of his body covered Harry’s chest and shoulders like some mirrored shirt. Harry could feel his delicate strength, which would suddenly become massive strength if Argutus should ever decide he wanted to crush something. “I have a surprise for you.”

He said nothing more than that, even as Harry made his way down the stairs towards the hospital wing, and finally he had to ask, “What is it?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

Harry was startled into a laugh before he thought about it. That was a distinctly English phrase, which he had translated once for Argutus. He hadn’t thought the Omen snake would remember it.

“Why are you surprised now?” Argutus asked, his tongue flickering out. “Now is not the time for surprises. Now is the time for farewells.”

“You don’t know how accurate you are,” Harry whispered, a heavy weight settling in his chest again. Not only did he not want to say farewell to some of the people he would bid it to—most notably his brother—but he couldn’t shake the feeling that some of them would be gone when he returned to the wider wizarding world. Without him here to protect them, could they survive?

“Now is not the time for sorrow, either,” said Argutus sternly, as they passed through Trelawney’s empty classroom and towards the ladder to climb down. “Now is the time for glad smiles and hugs and perhaps sausages, if there happen to be any lying around.”

It comforted Harry sometimes to remember that, clever or not, Argutus was still a snake, and had his priorities absolutely clear. “Would it have made a difference if I offered to come to the Sanctuary with you?”

Harry pulled back from hugging Connor and stared at him. “What?”

Connor’s eyes were quiet and thoughtful as he watched Harry—a look that Harry had come to dread, though it was an improvement over the snotty blankness he had used in third year. It usually meant he was about to say something perceptive and discomfiting. He had looked like that the whole time he spoke at their parents’ trial, in Harry’s opinion.

“If I’d said I’d go to the Sanctuary with you,” Connor clarified. “Would you still have been as reluctant to go as you are now, Harry?”

“I’m not reluctant to go—“

“Harry, your hand is twitching.” Connor snorted. “That means you’re lying.”

Harry looked down at his hand. “I’ve never noticed that,” he muttered. “And neither have Draco or Snape.”

“They’re more used to watching your face.” Connor shrugged. “Anyway. I want an answer. If I’d offered to go to the Sanctuary, or said that I wanted to heal there and asked you to come with me, would you still look as if it’s tearing the heart out of your chest to go?”

“It would be tearing the heart out of my chest to stay behind,” Harry tried to counter, “given that Draco is going, and—” I’m not going to say anything like “he’s my heart.” That’s too ridiculous. “—And he’s the only one who can make me see sense when I’m being stubborn. Even Snape doesn’t help as much as he does.”

Connor nodded. “But you still don’t want to go. And I’m asking you if it would have made a difference if I were the one asking you to go, and not Draco.”

“What are you, a terrier?” Harry muttered.

“Growl, growl,” Connor said.

Harry sighed and flexed his fingers. But, in the end, he owed his brother the truth.

“I would still be reluctant,” he said. “I would probably be more reluctant, because I trust you to take care of yourself now, unless it’s something like healing after a battle.” He met Connor’s eyes directly. “That’s why I’m glad that Peter’s going with you to Lux Aeterna this summer, and not just so that you can learn to like each other better. I’m worried about that sword.”

“It’s Light,” Connor said, his face changing.

“And what have we learned about Light objects and wizards who use them without questioning them?” Harry asked in his best professor’s tone.

Connor shook his head. “So you’ve got over your dependence on me, then? You wouldn’t want to go to the Sanctuary automatically, the moment I asked you to, just because you wouldn’t want me to heal without your overseeing every step?”

That had been why Harry was reluctant to start this subject in the first place. He still loved Connor, he always would, but Draco had taken a place of importance to him that no one else had. Harry had known that since he’d frozen while Voldemort’s dragon held Draco and threatened him. He might have been able to think if it was anyone else. He had been able to think of a plan while Snape was Voldemort’s prisoner, after all. But hold Draco hostage, and his mind turned to slow-grinding ice.

“Yes, that’s true,” said Harry at last. “I’m sorry, Connor—“

He lost his breath, and the chance to speak the rest of that sentence, when Connor’s arms wrapped around him and he squeezed. “Don’t be,” Connor whispered in his ear. “I’m glad, Harry. I’m so glad. I don’t think I could bear it, now that I know the truth about our childhood, if something in you had been broken and would never recover. I love you, and I want you to be able to have a life apart from me.”

Harry smiled faintly and hugged back, when he could get his arms into a proper position. “That’s not a problem any longer. But I do hope that you’ll always be a part of my life, Connor.”

Connor laughed and stepped away from him. “I think I will, now that I’ve learned to tolerate both a Malfoy being your joined partner and a greasy git being your guardian.”

“Are you quite done, Harry?”

Harry blinked when he realized Snape was standing in the doorway of the Gryffindor common room, the Fat Lady’s muffled protests coming from one side of him. He had a rigid look on his face, as if he

were struggling to keep from taking points from Gryffindor even though it was the summer and there were no points to take.

Connor refused to look intimidated. "Professor Snape, sir," he said, with a cheerful little nod. "Come here to escort Harry to his next farewell, just in case slime monsters jump out from around a corner and eat him on the way?"

"Slime monsters," said Snape, in a tone that combined viciousness and boredom both at once. "That is the kind of creature a limited Gryffindor brain would conceive."

Connor said nothing for a moment. Harry looked back anxiously at him, wondering if he would have to soothe genuine anger. He didn't understand it when he realized that Connor's face was stretched in a wide and almost Slytherin smile.

"Why, Professor Snape," said Connor innocently, "I thought you might have learned some admiration for Gryffindor brains. You've trained me in dueling for almost eight months, after all." Snape snorted as if that meant nothing. And it probably didn't, Harry knew. Snape tended to judge all his students by the most competent of them, which meant that unless Connor surpassed Harry in dueling, Snape would probably never respect him. "And then there was my plan to compel the Death Eaters on the flying horses to smash the sirens' tank," Connor continued innocently. "I thought you had some admiration for that."

Absolute silence from Snape's end of the room this time. Harry stared at him, at the surprise written clearly, if momentarily, on his face, and then had to fight the helpless urge to snicker.

He didn't know. Oh, he really didn't know.

Snape recovered in a moment. "That was Harry's doing, and not yours," he said coolly. "If you are quite finished insulting my intelligence, Mr. Potter, then—"

"Why should I be? You've never finished insulting mine. And it's quite strange, at least to me, that you think I would stand here in front of

Harry and lie about that. My brother's not the person he once was, Professor. He would certainly protest if I tried to take credit for something he'd done. Instead, as I remember, he was rather concerned about Voldemort holding his boyfriend at the time." Connor moved forward a step, eyes wide and grin now the supposedly helpless and naïve Gryffindor one. "You should worry about insulting him, Professor, by suggesting that he'd let me take credit for that, and that he was less than perfectly concerned about Draco."

Snape said nothing. After scrutinizing him for a moment, Harry realized it was because he had nothing to say.

He turned and gasped Connor's wrist. Connor cocked an eyebrow without taking his gaze from Snape. "Shhh, Harry," he whispered. "I want to enjoy the moment. It's not like it'll happen often."

"I congratulate you on achieving something I've never done for this long," said Harry formally. "In the contest to make Professor Snape act as if the Kneazle had his tongue, Gryffindor House wins."

Connor laughed, and that seemed, at last, to snap Snape's stillness. He looked at Harry, and one glance was enough. Harry gave Connor one more quick hug, and then fell into line behind Snape. He supposed he couldn't blame Snape entirely for wanting to escort him. His lack of sleep last night and his solitary trip to the Tower this morning had not inspired confidence that he might actually go to the Sanctuary, at least in Snape and Draco, oath aside.

Connor waved to him as they departed through the portrait. Harry waved back, and let his last vestiges of worry for his brother melt away. Connor looked entirely comfortable, standing there amidst the red and gold, and if shadows still haunted his eyes from the battle, they would fade.

He and Snape moved halfway down the corridor before Snape said, in an experimental voice, "I suppose you will not tell me this was a joke."

"I know better than to prank you, sir," said Harry.

Snape glared at him for a moment with the reference to the Marauders, but there was no heat behind it. "But he really did not—"

"Yes. He did."

"He could not have—"

"Yes. He did."

Snape fell silent again. Harry could feel him thinking, though, and so he supposed, regretfully, that he couldn't enter that particular silence in the contest to make it seem as if the Kneazle had Snape's tongue. Connor was still the winner there.

"I'll be leaving for two months," Harry repeated as patiently as he could, and held out his hand to Thomas Rhangnara again. "That's why I won't be here to help you research." He studied the man for a moment. His dark hair was crowded with cobwebs, and now and then he swiped at the dust on his cheek as if he knew it was there but didn't know what to do with it. "Have you been home to visit your family at all?" Harry added, mind suddenly filled with horrible visions of Pricilla Burke and her children never knowing if Thomas had survived the battle because he was lost permanently in the Hogwarts library.

For the first time, he coaxed an expression other than wide-eyed dreaminess out of Thomas. "Of course I have," he said indignantly. "And I have been able to go back and forth. The Headmistress has said that I may investigate the library as I like. She'll leave it open for me during the summer."

Harry shook his head in amusement. "And do you remember what I just told you about my going away for the summer?" he prompted gently. Behind him, Snape shifted, but kept his mouth shut. Harry had been reluctantly impressed with his self-control over the past few days, from the confrontation with Belville until now.

"I wish you could stay," said Thomas. "You can provide us with information about centaur magic that we still don't have."

“The centaurs in the Forbidden Forest are friendlier to wizards, now that their web is broken,” Harry offered. “You may be able to learn something from them, as long as you ask carefully.”

Thomas came close to looking deliriously happy. “Thank you,” he said. “I will ask them. And I will be polite about it.”

He probably would, Harry thought. Most people, even centaurs who weren’t used to the norms of wizarding society, would know that Thomas couldn’t possibly mean any offense. He simply wasn’t used to asking for things the way other people were.

“And I know that you have to go,” Thomas continued, “but I wish you could be here to see gootokom released.”

Harry frowned. “What?”

“Gootokom.” Thomas caught his expression of incomprehension then. “Sorry,” he said. “It’s an acronym, one that we’ve created a pronunciation for when we’re talking about it.”

“Who’s we?” Harry asked, and heard Snape shift again.

“Research wizards from every country with a wizarding community,” said Thomas promptly, his face brightening. “We’re calling what we’ve discovered G.U.T.O.E.K.O.M The Grand Unified Theory of Every Kind of Magic.”

Harry blinked a few times. Then he said, “But if you don’t understand centaur magic, then how can it be every kind of magic?”

“That’s one thing we’ve wondered about,” Thomas admitted, a tiny frown wrinkling his brows. “The magical creatures we’ve managed to study so far fit within the parameters, but we know precious little about so many others. And there are all the dead and extinct species that might possess magic like nothing we’ve ever seen and which our theory can’t account for. So some members of our group think that we should change the name to the Grand Unified Theory of Every Kind of Wizarding Magic. Of course, other members of our group argue that if some magical creatures’ powers behave in accordance

with our theory, than every one will, and so we can get away with the name. I don't tend to think like that, myself. One example is unicorn knots. They—“

“Rhangnara,” Snape said then, his voice on the edge of a growl. Harry could understand the next words, even if Thomas didn't. Do not get Harry so fascinated that he will not want to go to the Sanctuary.

Thomas blinked, and then nodded. “The theory is ready to be published in a preliminary form,” he told Harry, voice full of excitement. “I've been working on this for years, but that's nothing compared to some of the decades that people have spent on this. You ought to know what some of the wizards in France with connections to the Veela Council have gone through; they've got information on veela magic for us, but only with years of wheedling.”

“So you'll publish it,” said Harry, happy to hear about something that didn't concern war and death and politics, for once. “And you think that I should be here to read it?”

Thomas looked straight at him, and Harry saw the haze in his eyes clear. He was reminded, then, that just because Thomas often went on dreamy flights and tangents of fancy didn't mean he couldn't think.

“I do wish you could be here, yes,” said Thomas. “This theory is going to strike a blow at the very notion of pureblooded wizards, Harry.”

Harry thought for a moment, and then blinked as he realized what the likely reason was. “Magic doesn't follow bloodline,” he whispered.

Thomas shook his head. “It doesn't, not all the time. It interacts with bloodline, but it's nothing as simple as pureblooded wizards having magical children and the magic declining if those children marry Muggles or Squibs or Muggleborns—which was what most of the purebloods all over Europe believed for centuries. The occurrence of Squibs in their own family lines should have taught them better,” Thomas added in a mutter. “It's wilder and more random than that. Pureblood is a cultural distinction. It has none of the physical merit that most of the pureblood wizards try to make it have.”

Harry supposed he should find this appalling. The chaos that such a theory would cause once it got out and about was hard to contemplate. Harry knew that, while many European wizarding communities did not have purebloods completely dominating them, they had a sizable proportion of them, and fights over “blood purity” were sometimes more vicious than in Britain. Thomas and his group of research wizards were innocently proposing to overturn a good many of the beliefs that anchored politics and behavior in the British wizarding world and elsewhere.

And they anchor prejudice and pride, too.

Harry couldn't help himself; the people who detested him for it could blame it on his halfblood status, if they liked. He gave a smile of vicious delight at the thought of the people who had humiliated him at Draco's festival forced to eat their own words, or turning red with rage at the thought of Muggleborns being children of magic even as they were.

Then he thought of what Lucius's face would look like when he found out. Oh, he wished that someone he trusted could be there to snap a photograph of it.

“In fact,” Thomas was babbling on, “one interesting thing we've found is that halfblood wizards are sometimes among the most powerful.” He gave a nod to Harry, and then to Snape. “Not always, of course; there are lots of other factors that could interfere and make them less powerful. And those factors vary depending on the type of magic they receive, and the magic in the vicinity, and whether one parent is Muggleborn or Muggle or Squib or Muggleborn with Squib ancestors or...all kinds of things. But the strident effort to keep from interbreeding with Muggleborn wizards and witches is ridiculous.” Thomas scowled. “I love my culture as much as the next wizard, and if I'd found evidence that proclaimed the bigots were right after all, I'd have to accept that. But I didn't, and they shouldn't try to argue against what we keep finding—not just in Britain, but all over the world. They just shouldn't argue against it. Otherwise, they'll be stupid.” That was, obviously, his ultimate interest.

Harry had to ask one question, despite Snape's impatient shuffle from foot to foot. "And what is it that makes Muggleborns appear and some Squibs appear in pureblood lines? Can you summarize it for me quickly?"

"At core, at bottom?" Thomas smiled. "Well, that's something we still disagree a bit about, because there are a few of us arguing that the choice is completely random. I don't think it is. I think, and most of them are coming to agree with me, that it comes from free will. The magic chooses who it wants to wield it. Interacting with bloodline and place and a dozen other factors, of course. Or maybe more than a dozen. Petrovitch did identify thirteen, but I don't know if I can take—"

"That is enough," said Snape firmly. "Harry, Vera wants us to leave at noon. And you must still say farewell to others."

"That's true," said Harry, reluctantly. He nodded to Thomas. "I'm sorry. You can send me an owl detailing the matter if you like, though it will take a few weeks to reach me with all the shadows around the Seers' Sanctuary."

"I would like that," said Thomas. His face glowed gently. "This is one reason I've been so interested in your work, vates. If I'm right, then free will is the most basic component of magic, and all magic is a great deal more sentient than we ever gave it credit for. And your work as vates respects that more than a Lord who merely orders his magic, and the minds and free wills of others, around."

Harry caught his breath for a moment. Some of the gloom that had gripped him as he worried about what would happen to the wizarding world while he was gone dissipated. "Thank you, Thomas," he whispered.

"No problem at all." Thomas gazed at him with a fond smile. "I do rather like you, Harry, and your approach to magic has won my admiration."

Harry smiled at him and took his leave, with Snape's hand on his shoulder. His mind was buzzing with new ideas, though, especially given that he'd spent part of the three days before he'd promised

Draco he would go to the Sanctuary draining Black artifacts of magic and giving the power to the newly-made Squibs. He had to chuckle.

“What?” Snape demanded. Harry wondered if he’d been rattled at the thought of pureblood prejudices being wrong, or something else.

“I was thinking of what would happen if I absorbed magic from something else, or an enemy, like Belville’s magic,” said Harry, and waited.

“And?” Snape insisted, after a moment.

“And then gave the magic to a Muggle,” Harry finished innocently. “Many people get nervous because I can take their magic away, but what about making wizards? I can see why it hasn’t been done often, if at all. First you’d need to be an absorbere, and then you’d need to sacrifice the magic, which most people are reluctant to do. Dumbledore certainly never envisioned me doing it, and Voldemort never would. But what would happen if I did?”

“Save the revolution for after the Sanctuary,” Snape said gruffly. “Besides, the magic would likely drain away from them at once.”

“Perhaps I could create a magical core—“

“Rhangnara will make you as awful as himself, before he is done,” Snape muttered, and dragged Harry firmly down the hallway, while Harry busied himself in picturing Lucius’s response to that. Hawthorn had never felt so ashamed in her life as she watched Harry hold both her hands in his and stare at her. “And you’ll be all right this summer?” he asked. “You won’t be alone?”

“Delilah and Claudia will stay with me,” said Hawthorn softly. “Do not worry about it, Harry. I leaned on you too much in the first days after the siege, and for that, I am ashamed. I can only plead the blindness and madness of grief.”

Harry blinked at her. “I don’t know what you mean,” he said. “I was offering solace and comfort to anyone who needed it, and you needed it more than most, Mrs. Parkinson. Your husband your

daughter, both gone.” He drew in a breath like fishhooks. “You had a right to mourn.”

Hawthorn tried to think of what she could say to get her meaning across and not have Harry reject it at once. Then she shook her head and pulled him into an embrace. Harry went along with it, though he lay stiffly against her and took a long moment to hug her back. He was still startled whenever someone did this to him, Hawthorn thought, still a bit wary.

“I will mourn,” she said softly. “But I won’t mourn them forever, Harry. It’s why I wouldn’t have made a good necromancer. I’m not ready to sacrifice life, to give up closeness to the living world as both Pansy and Dragonsbane did. I want to retreat for a short time, even as you will, and then I am ready to embrace it.” She thought of the pain in her Dark Mark she had feared was infected, which had stopped the morning of the battle. She now thought it must have been the moment when Harry wounded Voldemort so badly that he was forced to go into hiding, though she had been involved in her grief and hadn’t noticed. A quick check with Snape, Lucius, Adalrico, and Pettigrew had revealed that their pain had stopped as well. Whatever the Dark Lord had been trying to do with their Marks, it hadn’t worked.

“That is brave of you,” said Harry.

“What you did was braver.” Hawthorn crouched down in front of him so that he wouldn’t have to strain his neck to look up at her. “To continue the struggle even though you had people asking things of you they would have no right to ask, grief or not. Harry, one thing I hope you learn in the Sanctuary is how to know when people are taking advantage of you, and how to refuse them.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Everybody says that,” he said.

“Everybody has a point.” Hawthorn kissed his forehead, on the scar, and resisted the temptation to lick it. Such gestures were for the pack. “I will see you, well and healed, in the autumn.”

Harry nodded, and stepped away from her, turning to look at Snape. Snape nodded, and guided him towards the hospital wing.

Hawthorn stood straight, watching them go, and then went towards her own room. She would stay in Hogwarts a few more days. She would take Wolfsbane on the nights of the full moon and run in the Forbidden Forest with Delilah and Claudia beside her. Then she could begin to think about healing.

On my own, this time, she thought as she shut her door behind her. I was tottering, but that was no reason to lean on the first shoulder that was offered, without thinking to look and see if that person needed support of his own.

Learn, Harry. Heal. Return to us stronger. That is for our sake, and the sake of the alliance, and your own. I want to see what you will become when you are healed.

Harry wrapped his arms around himself and tried to control his shivering. He thought he had everything he needed. His trunk was beside him, full of his school supplies, his clothes, his alliance gifts, and his Christmas gifts, as well as some books from the Black library, shrunk to fit. Argutus coiled lazily around his body, and the Many snake was wrapped around his neck. He'd said farewell to everyone he could think of, including Connor twice, when he'd shown up to the hospital wing and hugged Harry as if he'd sworn an oath of his own to do it for at least twenty minutes.

He was not cold. With the sun beaming down on the North Tower, where they waited for the carriage that would convey them to the Sanctuary, Harry could not be cold. And Argutus would have complained if he were.

He was shivering because he did not know if he could do this, after all, because the thought of going into a place like the Sanctuary and willingly letting other people see him hurt like mad.

"Harry."

Harry turned around. Draco, who'd said a private goodbye to Lucius and Narcissa this morning, was there, floating on an enchanted hospital bed. He watched Harry with sharp eyes, and Harry forced himself to incline his head.

"It's all right," Draco said softly. "I wouldn't ever take you to a place that would hurt you more than it would heal you, and I wouldn't ask you to go to a place like that for my sake, either. I truly believe it will be all right."

Harry walked over to him and leaned on his shoulder, letting Draco put an arm around his neck and hold him close. At least Draco would be there, he thought. He would have someone he trusted and loved, and someone who needed him, so that Harry could tend to Draco if his own healing became too much.

"Harry."

He turned. Vera had mounted the stairs, with a shrunken trunk of her own in her hand, and behind her was Snape, with his trunk and Draco's. Snape's scowl was as present as ever.

"It will be all right," Vera said, echoing Draco's words, which Harry supposed she must have heard. "We understand that the moments before healing can be just as terrifying as the moments of enduring the abuse. We know that. But you need this so badly."

Harry inclined his head in a shallow nod, and worked to keep himself from hyperventilating. He concentrated on Vera as she stood with her head back, studying the sky for a moment, and then smiled and pointed.

Harry turned, and saw a small white shape moving rapidly through the air towards them. Harry strained to see some sign of winged horses pulling it and couldn't manage. The carriage was white, carved of some material that radiated rainbow colors like mother-of-pearl, and looked just large enough and round enough for four to travel comfortably. It had no wheels. When Harry truly squinted, he thought he could see some sign of a golden rope running across the sky, on which it slid, but the rope faded away without trace when he looked for it again.

The carriage stopped with a gentle bump against the Tower, and Vera nodded to them as she opened the door. "Draco should enter

first,” she said, “to find a safe resting place and insure he is not jostled.”

Snape floated Draco inside, and then entered himself. That left Vera, holding the door, and Harry, standing at a distance from the carriage and feeling the greatest surge of reluctance he’d felt since he first dreamed the plan to go to the Sanctuary up.

“Harry,” said Vera again, and stretched out her free hand. “They will be well without you for two months.”

“You can’t know that,” Harry said. “You can’t See the future.”

“No, we can’t.” Vera’s face was infuriatingly serene. “But it is time, Harry, that they learned not to depend solely on you. The Lady Wolf knows it. Your Malfoy’s parents know it. Your Headmistress knows it. The others will learn. You are vates, and Boy-Who-Lived, and many other things, but you cannot be the answer to every problem, the bandage to every wound.” Her voice softened, as if she understood how much Harry hated hearing the words spoken aloud. “Especially when you have wounds of your own.”

Harry closed his eyes. He would hurt if he stayed in the wizarding world, but at least he would feel that he was doing his duty.

Blood and bone and breath. You swore.

Sometimes there is a higher duty.

Slowly, he stepped forward, climbed into the carriage, and took the seat beside Draco, not looking Vera in the eye. He felt Draco’s arm stretch around his shoulders again and tug him tightly against him. Argutus gave a crooning hiss.

“I can show you your surprise soon,” he said. “Do not be sad. Now is not a time for sorrow.”

Harry felt the carriage bobble as Vera climbed in, and then the door shut. They rose and skimmed, faster and more smoothly than would

have been possible on a broomstick, towards a direction Harry thought was the east and south.

He kept his head buried in Draco's shoulder, and did not look up, and tried to ignore his terror.

Chapter Ninety-Nine: Sanctuary

Harry woke slowly. He opened his eyes and saw cloth, then realized the pain in his neck had accelerated to the point of waking him up. He must have spent hours with his head buried in Draco's shoulder.

He sat back, rubbing at his neck, and Draco stirred and murmured, then shifted sideways and leaned against the carriage door. Harry glanced over his head. He could barely see anything, a combination of smudged glasses and the night that seemed to have fallen outside.

"We are in the shadows."

Harry jumped. Vera, who sat across from him, watched his every motion like a cat watching a mousehole—no, not quite that blatantly, Harry thought. But it was unnerving. He turned back to the shadows, squinting. He couldn't see a sign of light, not even the stars or the nearly full moon. "I didn't realize they looked like this," he said softly.

"Yes," Vera said. "We made a bargain with one of the dead magical species long ago, cousins of the Dementors. We could not use illusions, even to shield the Sanctuary and help us preserve our sanity, but they could. In return for their shielding us, we Saw a way for them to die at last."

Harry looked at her in wonder. "How long ago was that? Do you know what they were?"

Vera shook her head. "The records call them shadow-weavers, or shadowborn, and why not? But we have never been able to make that match with any history of magical creatures and wizards. Perhaps they were not even cousins of the Dementors, as the legend claims. We See the present most clearly, Harry, and recording the past is of assistance to us only in understanding our patients. I suspect those ancient Seers, once the shadow-weavers had done what they promised and left the world, did not care enough to retain the name."

Harry turned back to the windows one more time without answering. Her gaze had been piercing when she said that they understood and

kept their patients' pasts recorded, and he couldn't blame her for that. But he didn't have to stare into her face in some sort of silent communication.

He flinched when he realized that he could see something in the shadows this time. It was the bird with claws on its wings, teeth in its beak, and the lizard tail. It kept pace with the carriage, though Harry knew, if the vehicle had maintained its smooth, easy speed, that could not be easy. It turned its head towards the window and shrieked. Harry heard the shriek as mocking laughter. He wondered what would happen if it tried to enter and wound him, and if even a Seer could notice it. But the bird swerved off a moment later, and buried itself in the shadows with a flit of its tail.

"Harry?"

Harry realized he was shaking, his right hand clamped over the stump of his left wrist. He began counting to Mermish in his mind to make himself relax. When he thought he wouldn't shriek or plead for help, he gave Vera a fragile nod. "I'm well. I just saw something out the window that startled me."

Vera gazed at him in silence for a moment. "No one can see anything in the shadows," she said softly. "Nothing that is really there, at least. Hallucinations are, of course, excepted, and so are illusions."

Harry bowed his head and shrugged. "I suppose I'm just lucky, then," he said lightly.

He wasn't sure how much of his thoughts Vera could read. Sometimes she seemed able to discern the exact shape of what he was thinking; sometimes she seemed to refrain from that by courtesy; and sometimes she seemed to know his thoughts only as they related to his soul-wounds. She knew what he felt about his parents, but not the exact words in which he expressed those feelings.

"The strongest sensation about you right now is your terror," said Vera, her voice like running water. "I cannot determine exactly what causes this particular terror unless you tell me. Will you tell me, please, Harry?"

Harry shook his head and glanced over at Snape and Draco, unable to believe they hadn't commented so far. But Draco was asleep, and Snape had his eyes closed, an expression of intense concentration on his face that Harry recognized. He was reinforcing his Occlumency barriers, no doubt hoping that if he built them thick and high enough, the Seers couldn't read him. He wouldn't notice anything about the outside world until he was done, which might not be for hours.

"You cannot hide behind them." Vera's voice was gentle and pitiless. "There will be Seers at the Sanctuary who help all three of you separately, Harry. And though your Malfoy and the Bitter One do indeed carry scars of their own that will need time and healing, that does not mean you will spend every hour tending to them."

"Draco needs me," said Harry stiffly. "And Snape will be horribly uncomfortable if I'm not there. He only agreed to come because of me."

"That is true," said Vera. "I did not say that every hour would be spent not tending to them, either. But you must learn to relax and give yourself over to healing, to take time for yourself and not only for others."

Harry shut his eyes and did his best to ignore her. He wished he could vanish as deeply into his own mind as Snape could, but here his training hindered him. Lily had shown him how to be so alert to the world that he couldn't forsake it unless danger to Connor was involved. Harry had expanded that to include "danger to someone else," but it did mean that he heard every small shift from Vera, every nuance of Draco's breathing, every time Snape let out a subconscious murmur as he worked on the barriers.

"I thought you knew this." Vera's voice was flavored with disappointment now. "Why agree to come to the Sanctuary at all, Harry, if you did not want healing for your soul?"

"I don't know how to do what you want me to do," Harry whispered.

"And what is that, Harry?"

“How to just—” Harry shook his head. “I thought this would be wonderful because I could leave thoughts of the outside world behind. But thoughts of the outside world are coming with me.” His mind traced the arc of the bird’s dive past the carriage windows. Even the parts of the outside world that I don’t understand. They’re here. “I’ll scramble to keep from focusing on myself. That’s what I always do. If you insist that I can’t talk to Draco and Snape all the time, I’ll still worry about the werewolves, and the Ministry, and my reputation, and the war with Voldemort, and all the other problems I thought I came here to escape. I wanted this to be a holiday, but I don’t think it can be. I’ll make it not be so. I’m sorry.”

Vera didn’t reply for a long moment. Then she said, “Harry, you do not understand the nature of the Sanctuary. There is a reason that we can do things for the soul-stricken there that we can do nowhere else. It uses place magic, much like the Room of Requirement or the Ancient Vale.”

“Ancient Vale?” Harry echoed blankly, finally opening his eyes.

“The place you call Woodhouse.” Vera leaned over to him and patted his hand. “You think you will sabotage your own healing because you don’t know what the Sanctuary is like yet. In a short time, you will.”

Harry grunted noncommittally and looked out the windows again. The shadows still rushed past, featureless, and only the slight swing and creak of the carriage around them said they were moving at all. He could understand why owls took so long to reach the Sanctuary unless the Seers specifically opened the paths for them. It would be easy to get lost here.

The Sanctuary did seem to not be of a piece with the world around it. Harry didn’t think that was going to matter, though. He could feel worries building to a head in him already.

Will Loki really keep his bargain? Wilmot said he must if he swore his word in front of his pack, but do we know his pack was there? Perhaps he was bluffing.

What am I going to do if it turns out that more people blame me for the murder of those children than will work to exonerate me? I would have to stand trial, according to my own principles, but that will put my fight for everything and everyone else behind. Can I stand a sacrifice to Willoughby's grief and hatred, or the grief and hatred of other parents?

And I am swearing myself often to oaths lately. Is that compatible with being a vates? It reassures others, but should that be my primary concern?

The worries rushed and washed over him, and Harry sighed. He really had wanted this to be different, but he didn't see how it could. At least he was with Draco and Snape, and he knew Voldemort was extremely unlikely to attack while he was gone.

He might, though. What if he heals the wound in his magical core right away?

Harry shifted unhappily. Vera's gaze felt like a pin, holding him to the soft dragon-hide of the seat while he struggled to get away.

They broke abruptly into light, and Harry blinked. It looked to be no later than mid-afternoon by the angle of the sun, though he was sure he had slept hours, and they had been in the shadows for longer than that. He glanced at Vera, who said simply, "The shadow-weavers included wards that prevent even carriages from reaching the Sanctuary unless they are absolutely certain of their path, and that path is winding."

Harry looked out the windows again, and caught a glimpse of white as the carriage turned. Now he could feel the turns. He wondered how many circles the carriage had been forced to take in the shadows in the process of proving itself.

Now a glimpse of gold, and the carriage came down like a homing pigeon seeing its roost. Harry saw a large flat area ahead of them, and assumed it was where the carriage would land. After a short, fast hurtle between gleaming walls, that was exactly what happened.

The jolt woke Draco, and Snape, if he had not come out of his trance before and avoided showing it so that he wouldn't have to deal with Vera, returned from his meditation. He scowled instinctively. Harry found himself hoping that would stay the same. Snape needed help from the Sanctuary, of course, but if they changed him out of all recognition and against his will, could this be said to be a good place?

"Welcome."

Harry looked in surprise at Vera. Lines of tension that had carved her face had relaxed, and as she stood and opened the door, Harry felt that he had never seen her smile before.

"This is the Seers' Sanctuary," she said in a solemn voice as she ushered Snape out the door first, then Harry, and waved her wand to help float Draco. "More than that, it is a place of honor and homage, and a shrine to the present."

Harry thought it had the sound of a ritual welcome, and then he stepped out of the carriage and into such a strength of magic that he gasped. Suddenly, the need to speak ritual words on arriving at a place like this seemed much less strange.

He stared around. The walls on either side of them appeared to be made of golden brick, or white stone; they shimmered so much it was hard to be sure of both color and material. Tilting his head back, Harry could see a golden spiral hanging in midair, which straightened when it approached the walls. That was the path their carriage had taken, he thought. It faded as it climbed higher, until it became the transparent wire he had found so hard to see when the carriage came to rest on the North Tower.

"Do those paths run all over Britain?" he asked Vera.

Vera gave him a considering glance. "All over the world," she said, and then gently grasped Harry's shoulder and turned him around.

Harry saw the Sanctuary then, a dense mass of pillars and roofs and windows and balconies and gardens, flowing into and overlapping

each other. He blinked. Some of them looked ash-blackened, some red, some white, some gold, some the pallid blue of shadows on winter snow. They appeared to fall away from them, down a slope, but Harry didn't know if that was reality or an illusion created by the immense number of roofs that ended one above another. He shook his head. "I thought it would be all white and gold," he said.

Vera laughed softly, and the air picked up the sound and made it echo more than it should have. Harry shivered. Most wizards had given up on place magic long ago; wands were portable, and that was important for a society that had to travel often from one place to another to work, visit relatives, conduct politics, and entertain itself. But the great advantage of place magic was its echo effect. A community of wizards located long enough in one place, all of them doing magic, would build up that magic, and the weight of the past would seep into the present and the future, cradling them and making new spells more powerful than they might otherwise have been—which in turn amplified and rebounded into and resonated with the place magic already there. Harry could feel the heaviness of the air, a heaviness that made it seem as if it were always summer in the Sanctuary, and knew that things would indeed be as different here as Vera had promised him. He shivered and wrapped his arms around his body.

"We are a shrine to the present," said Vera firmly. She pointed over Harry's shoulder to one of the red roofs, which seemed, as far as Harry could tell, to belong to a temple-like house whose doors were all open. "That room, for example, enshrines a magic that none of us have ever seen before, and which we don't know how to practice. We have dared to speculate that it comes from Albania, but we don't know that. When it dies out, that room will vanish. There are rooms here for every kind of magic practiced in the world, Light and Dark."

"Why?" Harry whispered.

"At first, it came from Seers bringing dangerous artifacts here to keep them from the hands of those who would misuse them," said Vera, guiding him down a series of steps from their landing. Snape followed, floating Draco; Harry could hear them conversing in low voices, but when he tried to listen, it was Vera's that claimed his attention. "So

many accumulated, and so much wizard magic went on in the meantime, that rooms of their own started forming spontaneously. And, of course, Seers went out into the world and brought back memories of what they had seen, and some were actual practitioners of arts other than Seeing, or possessed other gifts. More and more rooms came into being. But they always vanish when the last remnant of that art or that species dies out. We do not linger in the past. We see souls as they are, and work towards what they will be.”

“It’s not only that, though, is it?” Harry lunged for the same sense of alarm he’d felt on seeing the bird outside the carriage windows. The fear felt distant, though, like a dream. And it wasn’t compulsion, or a muffling of his thoughts, the way that Connor had described the Potter sword as doing to him so that he could kill. It was, instead, as if someone had spoken sternly to him and reminded him that the bird was not here right now and he should concentrate on what actually lay in front of him. “There’s something more here than just gathering magic. That’s not the Sanctuary’s purpose.”

Vera nodded with a faint smile. “Looking into souls teaches us all compassion sooner or later, Harry.” She guided him gently around a broken place in one of the steps, where fallen leaves from—somewhere—danced in an eddy, caught by a whirl of wind. “The Seers who start out unimpressed or hateful do not retain that edge, even if it takes them years to lose it. We notice too much, and while there are some people in the world, like Albus Dumbledore, who may be twisted beyond all redemption or repair, there are many more who only appear that way.” She cast a speaking glance over her shoulder at Snape. “So our purpose becomes healing, challenging of wounds, going forward. And that purpose interacts with the valley. Violence is not permissible here. None of the truly dangerous and Dark artifacts can function. They are still enshrined, still honored, because they exist, and their existence deserves notice. But they are neglected if their only purpose is to hurt.”

“What happened to Remus?” Harry asked. “Did he still transform?”

“Yes,” said Vera softly. “The werewolf curse is a curse, Harry, rather than a soul-wound. But he did not need Wolfsbane when he did so.

When he transformed, the Sanctuary simply forbade him to hurt anyone. He learned how to run and enjoy his strength, instead.”

Harry blinked. “Do you eat meat at all?”

Vera laughed. “No, unless it dies naturally. Or, if we have a guest who requires it, it must be brought in from outside the Sanctuary. Understand, Harry, we do not insist that everyone who comes here change at once to suit us. It is simply easier not to have violent thoughts, or to kill. One’s thoughts settle into the groove already traced here.”

“It sounds to me as if the past does influence you,” Harry muttered, as they reached the bottom of the stairs. The view of the Sanctuary had changed, now, but it was still so varied and so distinct that Harry found it hard to locate one point that he wanted to stare at more than others. He did study the house they seemed to be approaching, which was a five-pointed purple roof set upon pillars open to the world. Wind whisked in and out between them with a sweeping sound. Harry could see more of the small eddies at play in between the pillars. He recognized, after a moment, that they weren’t normal winds at all, but magic—magic doing just what it wanted, playing because that was what it wanted to do.

Vera laughed again. “Oh, it does, if you consider having the same purpose for centuries to be focusing on the past. But, once again, Harry, we do not retain the past and brood on it.” She smiled at him. “The Sanctuary does not like that, either, and though it will not force our guests out of those thoughts as readily as it will out of thoughts of violence, it will continually remind you of what is around you, so that it is extremely hard to get lost in your own mind.” Another glance towards Snape, whom Harry was beginning to feel sorry for. “That is why you should not worry that you will be unable to forget the outside world. The valley will help, patiently wearing away at you until you think about what is in front of you, not behind.”

Harry swallowed. “I’ve tried that,” he said, as they reached the side of the pillared house. He could see several people waiting for them, one tall one clad in white robes and several shorter ones in dark. The tall one appeared to be a man; he wasn’t sure about the gender of the

others. "I tried to forgive my parents last year and move forward, and it didn't work."

"That's because you did not truly forgive them," said Vera, "only said that matters would be different when you had not faced every nuance of the abuse. The Sanctuary will put the past in front of you, Harry, because that is the way the magic deals with it, and blend the past with the present so that you can reach your future."

Harry closed his eyes. He truly understood for the first time what he was getting into, and his resignation, the idea that he would have to think about his other problems because he had no choice, was gone. Instead, he broke into another fit of shivering as the terror returned full force.

Vera's hand brushed his shoulder. "I will be the one working with you," she murmured. "Do not fear, Harry. Yes, it is hard, but the Sanctuary does not propose to shut you up in a room with the nightmares of your past and let you scream alone. It looks to what is and what will be, and it takes the road through fear towards the morning." Harry could hear her smile.

The other Seers came forward to greet them, then, with no more than a few sharp glances. Harry thought he might know part of the purpose for their long, slow approach; the Seers would need time to absorb their glimpses of new souls without getting overwhelmed. Vera had hidden when she and Peter first met with him at Hogwarts, to think about what she saw.

Harry became aware, as the tall man approached, that the Many snake had not uncoiled from his throat to hiss since they entered the Sanctuary. Argutus, who had dropped off his body sometime on the stairs to slither off into the undergrowth, had expressed no fear, either. The message of the very air was peace, Harry thought, as he stretched out his hand to grip the man's.

The Seer nodded to him. His hair was very dark, his eyes a pallid yellow that spoke of a Light pureblood background. "My name is Joseph," he said. He studied Snape and Draco for a moment, and then smiled. Harry thought the smile reminded him of some of

Connor's, when he had planned a strategy that would be sure to catch the Snitch this time. "You are Harry, and Draco Malfoy, and Severus Snape. Yes, Vera has told us something about you. And I look forward to working with you, sir." He inclined his head to Snape.

Harry glanced back in time to see Snape narrow his eyes. "I did not come here to be healed," he said, voice missing a small bit of its normal snap. "I came here because my son needs to heal."

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat that those words produced, and turned back to Joseph. This really might be as good as watching a Quidditch game, he saw, when Joseph refused to back off, or even look intimidated. "You did not come here to heal," said Joseph, "but that is what will happen."

Snape made a snarling sound.

Joseph smiled at him.

"My name is Nina," said another Seer, one of the ones in the darker robes. She stepped forward around Joseph and gave Harry one look from brown eyes filled with compassion, then turned to Draco. "I would like to work with you, Mr. Malfoy, unless you have any objections."

Draco looked a bit better than he had before they entered the carriage, and even on his dignity, though Harry didn't know how he managed that while reclining on a bed of air. He nodded. "That will be acceptable," he said.

"You were on the move for hours, Vera," said Joseph. "Would you like to come inside and eat?"

"Yes, please, Joseph," said Vera, and Harry heard weariness in her voice for the first time. "It's been months and months in a mirror-world."

Harry glanced at her a few times as they walked between the pillars into a cool, dark room filled with tables. One of them was set with goblets of water, and plates of bread and cheese and fruit that made

Harry's mouth water. "Why did you stay so long at Hogwarts, if it hurt so much?" he asked, as he bit into a pear and had to close his eyes at the juice. "I thought you would go back to the Sanctuary in just a few months, especially since I didn't talk to you that often."

Vera took a long drink of water before she replied. Light danced on the silver of her cup—more magic playing, Harry thought, and varying the gleams like an artist. "I was determined not to return until you were ready to come with me," she said softly. "Your soul's been ripped open and apart too many times, Harry. This time, I mean the healing to be final."

Harry bowed his head so that she wouldn't see the tears that were suddenly, and ferociously, and inexplicably, prickling at his eyes. Damned Sanctuary getting to me, he thought, and swiped at his face. Draco frowned at Harry's back. What's the matter with him? He hasn't talked to me since we arrived. Is he hurt? Is he ignoring me? Does he think that just because we'll be speaking to separate Seers it's appropriate that we not talk any more?

Fuck that. Draco was going to talk to Harry all he wanted, and he hoped that by the time the next ritual of their joining arrived, just a bit more than a month away, Harry would have overcome enough of his training to want more than a kiss.

He started to reach into his robe pocket for his wand and direct himself to float over to Harry, but Nina interrupted him. She was a short woman who appeared to drift about rather than walk, and who had nevertheless managed to fetch Draco the cup of water and the plate of bread and cheese he asked for before he realized she had moved. "Do you prefer Mr. Malfoy or Draco?" she asked him.

Draco snorted. "It would be stupid to stand on ceremony when you can see my soul," he said in a drawl. "Draco will do." He glanced again over at Harry, who was still talking to Vera, and stifled a surge of irritation. Perhaps she can tell me what the matter with him is. "Is it a rule that guests must talk only to the Seers and not to each other?"

Nina blinked, then smiled. "Of course not, or you and Mr. Snape would have been stopped on the way down the stairs."

"I'd call him Professor Snape," Draco warned her. "He's very prickly about his titles."

"I can See that," said Nina. "And I am glad not to be working with him. Now, what prompted you to ask that question?"

"Harry isn't talking to me." Draco fought down the urge to whine. He already might look pathetic, floating around like an invalid and bearing gaping wounds in his soul that would be as visible to these people as if they were wounds on his body. "I want to know why."

"The Sanctuary blends the present with the past," said Nina. "It does that so that most of our guests cannot hide from themselves. I only had time to truly understand about half of what I saw in Harry's soul, but I would imagine that he is caught up in such a whirlwind, such a change, that it is all he can think about at the moment. I'm sure he doesn't mean to ignore you."

Her last words rang with confidence, not a soothing tone, and Draco was satisfied. Of course, they could tell if he does mean to ignore me. "I'm not thinking about the past yet, though," he pointed out.

"Give it a bit more time," said Nina. "For everyone, it is different. I have seen traumatic memories overwhelm our guests, and people who simply stared off into space and smiled at the images there. For you, it seems to be appearing in the form of old uncertainties. Or are Malfoys usually so insistent that their boyfriends talk to them, their first time in a strange place?" Her smile was sly.

"He's not my boyfriend," said Draco, striving to sound like his father. "We are dancing out a ritual that will take three years, and will make us joined partners by the time it's done."

Nina's smile widened, and Draco realized that of course she must have been able to See that, and had enjoyed teasing him. "You're going to be like this, aren't you?" he accused her.

“Probably,” Nina agreed. “When I first looked into my own soul, I saw my sense of humor wound through everything. It seemed wiser to use it than to ignore it.” She cocked her head at Draco. “And wiser, I think, to leave Harry alone for the first few hours he’s here. He’ll talk to you tomorrow, I’m sure, and every day thereafter. But you both need some time apart.”

It suddenly hit Draco that, along with making sure Voldemort’s taint didn’t infect him, or as part of that, he would have Nina practically hanging on his every word.

That could be flattering, he thought, and smiled at her. “Will you listen to anything I want to talk about?”

Nina smiled. “Of course.”

“Even if it involves Harry and bedding him?” That was the one thing Draco wished he did have someone to talk to about. But of course Snape and his parents were not candidates, and Harry wasn’t at the point yet where he did much more than blush and look uncomfortable.

“Of course,” Nina repeated. “But expect me to want to talk about you, as well.” She examined him as though he had food on his robes. “Your soul’s interesting.”

Draco smiled. There’s a compliment I’m never going to get from anyone else—except perhaps Harry, when he feels ready to give compliments. I think I can be happy here.

Snape knew now that Occlumency barriers were not sufficient to prevent one of these Seers from Seeing whatever he liked.

He was not dealing well with the discovery.

Joseph had not yet attempted to speak to him beyond his first greeting. He stood near the table, sipping water from a goblet of his own, and eyed Snape with an expression that reminded Snape far, far too much of Sirius Black just before he played a prank. Snape held himself straight, and refused every offer of food or drink with a glare of such rage that the Seers had given up even looking at him.

Vera was talking to Harry, and the woman she had introduced as Nina to Draco. Snape supposed he should be grateful that the man supposed to “speak” with him had not approached him so far.

Inevitably, of course, Joseph did. Snape readied himself, touching one vial of a potion in his pocket that could be absorbed through the skin and would render the person it touched instantly immobile. The man’s sleeves were wide and open, at least, unless that was a glamour—but Snape thought he would have sensed it if it were. His wand was securely fastened to his belt, inside a holster, and it would take him a moment to pull it out. He walked as though he had nothing ready for a joke strapped to his legs, and he held his hands where Snape could see them.

Of course, he can read my mind, or at least my soul, if what Harry says is true. Snape stared at him. So he would know that I am expecting a prank, and he would not play one now.

Joseph’s smile slipped off his face. Snape felt a brief pang of bitter pleasure at that minor victory. He halted a few feet away and studied Snape seriously, then shook his head.

“Sometimes, guests coming to the Sanctuary do prefer to go through healing on their own,” Joseph said. Now he looked like Scrimgeour. Snape would not let that fool him. Once a prank-player, always a prank-player. He had always been the victim of bullies like this one, children of a charmed life, who thought that not only was Snape their rightful prey but nothing they did to him really mattered. “But I do not think you are right for that,” the insufferable man went on, as if Snape did not know exactly what he was. “You will fight every revelation that comes to you. You came out of love, but you can barely acknowledge that love right now. You’re trying to build walls around you that won’t let any emotion through as long as you’re here.

“The Sanctuary was created to wear down such walls.” Joseph paused for a moment, eyes very quiet, and then said in an equally soft voice, “You’re hostile even to me, and while I can understand that, seeing the knots the world has put in your soul, it will get you nowhere. I am not someone you’ve met before, with a stake in

torturing you. I am not someone who finds your soul as ugly as you think it is. I am someone who wants to help heal you.”

Snape hissed softly, and had the satisfaction of seeing Joseph take a step back. “I know what I am,” Snape said, keeping his voice low so that no one else could intrude on the conversation. “I saw my own soul at seventeen, thanks to a potion. Then I sat in a room with my mother for three days, while she died, and I learned truths that no Seer could ever show me. I will thank you not to think that healing is what I desire or can accomplish.”

“It’s going to happen nevertheless,” said Joseph. “And you should know that I’m impervious to insult. When Vera told us about you, we all agreed that I was the best choice to work with you.”

“I do not plan to talk with you,” said Snape flatly. “I do not plan to let you heal me, as you keep claiming. I cannot prevent you from seeing my soul, but I am here to see to the healing of my son, and that is all.”

Joseph didn’t even react to the statement that Harry was Snape’s son. He simply nodded. “I would not expect you to change overnight, poisonous and deep as your hatreds are,” he said. “I will sound the wells of them, and do what I can to purge you of them.”

“Why?” Snape snarled, some of his frustration with the place breaking loose at last. “Why would you want to do this?”

Joseph smiled, and the look that made him resemble Sirius Black was there again. This time, Snape could give it more nuances—not the look that Black had just before playing a prank, but the gleam of challenge, the glint that said he would be a part of Snape’s life whether Snape wanted him to be or not. “You can call it aesthetics,” Joseph said. “I prefer looking at souls at peace with themselves to souls at war. Or you could call it compassion, though I understand that counts for little in your world. Or you could call it the thrill of the hunt, which you almost certainly will.”

He leaned forward until he was a few inches from Snape, and whispered, “The important thing you should know about me is that I will not go away. I’ll do whatever I can to make this healing

comfortable for you instead of challenging, but I do not give up.”

Snape sneered and turned his back, striding towards Harry. It was high time that he rested. Snape knew he had slept in the carriage, but it hadn't been for long.

He ignored Joseph's eyes on his back. He had other defenses beyond the Occlumency barriers, which, he could see now, had been feeble. He had been a Death Eater, and a spy, and a teacher of some of the worst menaces to wizarding kind in Potions. Anyone who tried to heal him would lose the battle to the reserves of pure spite he could summon.

And I will never mention my mother again. It is the air of this place. I was not prepared. But I will raise walls that cannot be eaten by its acid.

Harry woke slowly the next morning, and lay there, staring up at the ceiling. He had slept without dreams, and certainly without visions, unless you counted a vague dream of Draco a few minutes before he woke.

He knew his first session with Vera was today. He knew that he would go downstairs and have nothing to do but eat, talk with Draco and Snape, and concentrate on healing himself.

He closed his eyes and sat up.

“Harry?”

Harry opened his eyes and smiled as he watched Argutus come in through the window of the room the Seers had given him. It was fairly high above ground, or perhaps only fairly high up in the tumble of buildings that made up the Sanctuary. The walls were white stone, and it was filled with windows that had no shutters or glass, and were simply open to the wind. Harry could ward them with magic if he chose, of course. The bed was a vivid splash of blue in the middle of all that, and the mirror on the wall and the pool of water, actually set into the floor, in a corner were equally intense splashes of silver.

Harry's trunk sat at the bottom of the bed, since he hadn't unpacked yet.

He was glad, at the moment, that the room was rough stone on the outside, too, so that Argutus could climb up and twine around him. He didn't immediately put his head on Harry's left wrist, this time, but wrapped around his shoulders.

"I have your surprise ready for you now," he said.

Harry chuckled. "So soon?"

Argutus wriggled his tail in impatience. "Look."

For a moment, Harry didn't know where he was supposed to be looking. Then he realized that Argutus had turned so that his neck, and not just his head, rested near Harry's left wrist. He looked, and saw his stump reflected in Argutus's shimmering scales.

Above the stump danced a wisp of darkness. Harry whispered, "What is that?"

"The magic the child-eating woman used to prevent you from regrowing your hand," said Argutus at once. "I could reflect runes, and it came to me that I should learn to reflect the Dark magic, so that you could see it and identify the curses. Then you can undo them, and you can have a hand again." He turned his head and lashed his tongue gently against Harry's cheek. "Surprise."

Harry swallowed. He had put off researching the Dark curses Bellatrix had used because it would take too long, and anyway, he still didn't want to admit he was weak and sometimes wanted a second hand back. But now, if he could see the curses themselves, it would be much easier to work out a way to undo them.

And he had no real excuse to avoid getting a second hand back if he could undo them.

"What's the matter?" Argutus flicked his tongue again, this time uncertainly. "You're crying."

Harry swallowed again and wiped at the tears with his hand. "I—it's a wonderful gift, Argutus, thank you," he said.

"That doesn't explain the crying."

Harry tried to, but managed to say only, weakly, "I think—I think I'm going to change, now, really change, and I'm not sure if I like it." Not even the air of the Sanctuary could soothe the tight bubble of pain and panic that soared up in his chest, or not immediately. What am I going to become? What if I do lose some of the morals I still have, like not using force? The hand was not really the sign of that possible loss of his moral compass, but a catalyst for it.

Harry felt as if the world were falling away from him. He buried his face in his arms, and felt Argutus coil around him, though just tight enough to comfort, not constrict his breathing. He swallowed again and again and again, and told himself that he wouldn't sob, wouldn't cry any further.

He had thought he would still recognize himself when this summer was done. Now, he wasn't sure.

"Harry? Should I find the nice lady and fetch her? She does not understand me, but she could follow me."

Harry shuddered.

Then he sat on the terror, and said, "No, Argutus. I'll—get her. I'm supposed to go down and talk to her anyway, soon."

"You are brave."

"I leave that up to my brother," Harry muttered, and sat for another moment shaking and wishing he did not have this terror, that he could either accept what was to come or cling to what he had been, and just do it strongly either way, damn it, not showing any weakness. One crack in himself could lead to a shattering he knew that neither he nor the wizarding world could sustain.

Then he picked himself up, winding Argutus gently around his waist so he wouldn't dangle, and went to talk to Vera and tell her about the possibility for getting his hand back—and, doubtless, why he wasn't sure he wanted it back.

He didn't know if it was the bravest thing he had ever done, but it felt like it at the time.

Chapter One Hundred: At Peace

"But I'm not sure I want my hand back," Harry said, when he'd shown Vera Argutus's reflection of the Dark spells and what it meant. "I just know that now I have no excuse to avoid breaking the curses."

They were sitting in one of the Sanctuary's higher rooms, full of air and light. Harry could feel the throb of contained magic from the rooms next to them, and wondered tiredly for a moment what housed there. He leaned against the back of his chair, which was crushed velvet or some material even softer, and shut his eyes.

"Why don't you want it back?" Vera asked him.

Harry didn't open his eyes, but he nodded. This was the reason he had come to her about it. Draco or Snape wouldn't have asked the question in such a reasonable tone. Draco had never understood Harry's feelings about his lost hand at all, and Snape, on edge with people able to see his soul, would have snapped. And Harry understood both those reactions, so he couldn't even blame them.

"Because it would be a sign of admitting weakness," said Harry, "if I cared about that to the exclusion of anything else. I do know some people who would have stopped at nothing until they'd broken all of Bellatrix's curses and had their missing limbs back. I'm not one of them." He opened his eyes and watched Vera for a moment. She sat in a chair with its back to one of the windows, her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes intent on his face. It made her look surrounded by light, diminished by the light, as if Harry were speaking to the sun instead of her. He could handle that.

"And because I didn't want to devote time to it," Harry said, even more quietly. "It was unimportant, next to so many of the other things I was doing. How could I say that I cared more about my hand than about working for the rights of werewolves, or reconciling with Snape, or studying the Dark curses that Voldemort used?" He shook his head, feeling his hair scrape lightly against the chair. "I only have so much time. I used to try to extend that time by skipping meals and sleep. Draco and Snape objected to that. But with having to do that, I'm left with a limited amount of hours, and some of that goes to schoolwork

and to things I must do, and the rest of that, as much as I can spare, to the things I want to do: building the political alliance against Voldemort, especially, and vates work. I was already faltering and dropping threads because I did not have enough hours to weave them all in. Researching my hand—that fell far, far to the bottom of the priority list. It would have benefited no one but myself.”

“You could have asked someone else to research it for you,” Vera observed quietly. She didn’t accuse, she just made the statement, and Harry found himself relaxing. He’d become used to studying someone else’s mood before he said something, especially in the last week with all the grief over the siege. There were things that someone could not bear to hear, and other things that could be said, but only at a later time. Vera seemed like a person to whom he could say almost anything. She was also a person he did not have to be strong for, and Harry appreciated that gift more than he could say.

“I suppose I also need to learn how to delegate,” said Harry, winning a faint smile from her. “But, if I had, I still would have asked someone else to research the curses Voldemort used or my allies’ pasts or proper greetings for magical species I haven’t met yet, not my hand.”

“And why not?”

Harry eyed her. “Same reason at the bottom of both weakness and not wanting to take time for it, I suppose,” he said. “It’s too personal.”

Vera nodded. “Do you wish to research these curses over the summer, Harry? I should warn you that the Sanctuary does not have extensive libraries. We do have rooms where you can venture to observe the effects of magic like this, and see what it does.”

Harry blinked. “You’d offer me a choice?”

“Of course I would,” said Vera.

I should do this. Snape asked me to at least think about it. Draco would be thrilled if I did this. Harry looked at Argutus, draped like a

shimmering curtain over his shoulders. “And Argutus gave me a gift with his reflections that I shouldn’t neglect,” he murmured aloud.

“You are talking about me, but in that language. I heard my name.” Argutus poked him with his nose. “What did you say?”

Harry heard Vera make a soft noise—chuckle or sigh, he could not have said. He looked up at her, and she asked, “Is he wanting to know what you said? I know he can’t understand English.”

Harry nodded.

“Explain the situation to him. You might be surprised at his response.”

Hesitantly, Harry focused on Argutus and let his words emerge in Parseltongue. “I don’t know yet if I want my hand back, Argutus,” he said. “But I do appreciate what you did for me, and I think it would be selfish to neglect that gift.”

Argutus was quiet for a moment. Then his tail coiled up and wrapped gently around the side of Harry’s head.

“It is your gift,” Argutus said, turning to flicker his tongue along Harry’s cheek again. “You should do what’s necessary to you with it. I want you to want what you want.”

Harry stared at him. He wasn’t sure if he was more shocked by what Argutus had said or by hearing such sophisticated reasoning from an Omen snake.

“And what did he say?” prompted Vera.

“He said—” Harry began, and then saw Vera shake her head and realized he was still speaking Parseltongue. Sheepishly, he focused on her and repeated, “He said that the gift was mine to do what I want with. He wants me to want what I want.”

Vera’s face lit with a soft smile. “And so do I, Harry,” she said. “And so do many of the people around you, I would think, though they may override it by making commitments to your safety first, or they may

draped it in metaphors about your training that make it seem as if you have no free will. But your Malfoy and the Bitter One are, perhaps, overly close to you. Do not think about what they might want, Harry. Do not think about what politeness demands of you, or politics, for once in your life.” There was an urgency in her voice he’d never heard before as she leaned forward and laid a hand on his knee. “Think about what you want, for once in your life. I will not push you. Argutus will not push you.”

“That’s why I came to talk to you about this in the first place,” Harry whispered.

“Yes, exactly.” She beamed at him. “Not to say that your Malfoy and the Bitter One would not be displeased if you learned to want things just because you want them, but it is not their choice, Harry, it is yours.”

Harry cocked his head. “And you don’t think it’s selfish?” he asked. Probing at this felt like testing a loose tooth with his tongue. It hurt, but he couldn’t keep himself from picking at it.

Vera shook her head. “If you need someone to tell you it’s not selfish, Harry, I will,” she said. “It’s not. Do you think what your Malfoy wants of you in the joining ritual is selfish, simply because it will take three years and binds you to taking no other partner during that time?”

“But I don’t want any other partner, anyway,” said Harry, bewildered. “And, well, that’s Draco, and not—” He stopped.

“Not you.”

“Yes.” Harry stared down at his hand and the darkly-glowing stump. I had thought I was doing selfish things. I wounded Voldemort enough to give us this Voldemort-free summer, after all. I yelled back at Snape and Draco when they pressed me too hard. I had thought I knew what I wanted. Perhaps not completely, not yet.

Around him, chains seemed to be flying away, and the intense terror that had lurked within him since he had come to the Sanctuary began to thaw. He looked up at Vera. “You won’t recommend that I get another hand?”

Vera shook her head.

“You won’t recommend that I change in ways that I don’t want to?”

Again she shook her head. “I will point out when I think that your stated reason for a decision is not the one your soul is showing me,” she said. “That is why I am the one speaking with you, after all. I can see things you can’t. But you have been aware of the basics of what I see for a long time now, Harry. And you are no longer a child, and you are certainly very far from selfish. You are allowed to make your own decisions, to want what you want, and if you do not want another hand and you do not want a surname, both of those are your choices. And so are dozens more.”

Harry closed his eyes. The terror was even smaller now. “I—I’d like to walk for a while now, Vera,” he said. “I need time to think.”

“Good, Harry,” Vera said, a smile lightening across her face.

“Good, what?” Harry gave her a confused glance.

“Thinking about it,” said Vera, standing. “There was a time not so long ago when you would have thought about anything but that.”

Harry nodded to her, confused and bewildered and free, and wandered out of the room in a half-daze. He paused outside the door to put Argutus down, though. He wanted to be completely alone. Snape woke in an unfamiliar bed, his wand in his hand, his head already turning towards the threat. It had been a knock on the door, carefully placed on the one patch of clear wood not protected by Snape’s wards. Snape supposed he should have known Seers would see that one patch, but he was still disappointed that this one hadn’t hit another place first and burned his hand.

“Good morning, Snape,” Joseph’s voice called cheerfully from beyond the door. “I’m here to tell you that there is refreshment waiting for you in the same room we ate in yesterday, if you’re hungry. Also, we’ve set up a potions lab for you in the room next to this one.”

"I had already chosen my lab," Snape called back. He knew his voice was low and ugly, but he could not help it. He'd had a nightmare about Voldemort laughing as he taunted him, an imagination of what would have happened if the Dark Lord had discovered him during his days of spying. "I would have appreciated if you had left my supplies where I put them."

"Couldn't do that, I'm afraid," said Joseph, voice firmer now. "That's the roosting place of a flock of Diricawls. They need it. If you had bothered to read the plaque we'd placed on the wall, you would know that."

Snape grunted. The truth was, he'd seen the plaque, but not wanted to take the time to read it. He resented everything about the Sanctuary, and after making sure he would know the way from his room to Harry's room, Draco's room, and his lab, he'd gone to sleep.

"You can try to irritate us," said Joseph. "I know you're good at that. But the truth is, none of us irritate easily, though there are many who will leave you politely alone. I'm not going to do that."

Snape rose with a snap and a snarl. He strode across the room and jerked the door open. Joseph looked at him with one eyebrow raised. It did not please Snape at all that they were the same height and shared the same gestures. At least he'd been a bit taller than both Sirius Black and James Potter.

"I want you to leave me alone," he said. "I want you to stop trying to heal me. If you force me to change against my will, then I can only conclude that you practice Dark Arts. I came here to accompany my son, not to heal."

"So you've said." Joseph's expression was calm. "But the Sanctuary itself works on the souls of those who come here. It's rather like plunging into a pool; you're still going to get wet even if you only entered it so that your child wouldn't drown. If you do want to be left completely alone, then I will leave you completely alone. But the transition is not an easy one. The way the Sanctuary reaches out to

you is generally through dreams in that case. They are memories of the past, seen from another angle. They will not let you hide.”

Snape shook his head. “The comparison is not apt,” he said, wondering why the man would not simply depart. “Or it is only in a way that you do not wish it to be. I could work charms to keep myself safe from the water. I will take Dreamless Sleep Potion to keep myself safe from the dreams.”

Joseph sighed. “I suppose that might work, yes, since you’re a Potions Master,” he murmured.

“So disappointed?” Snape was delighted by the first crack he’d seen in the older man’s façade since they arrived. “You wanted to drag me kicking and screaming into your smiling world? Did you think I would be so easy to work with?”

“Frankly, no,” said Joseph. “My motivation is compassion. That is the one I told you about yesterday, that I knew you would not understand. I have seen souls marked by hatred as deep as yours is, and I know your past was not an easy one. I wish to heal you for the same reasons Vera wishes to heal Harry. But Harry’s grand reasons for not healing so far have been lack of time and lack of understanding between what is a wound and what is wholeness. Yours have to do with a large amount of self-blame. You consider yourself implicated in the ruin of your soul.”

Snape curled his lip. “How very, very clever of you to notice.”

“Not so clever,” said Joseph. “A Seer who hadn’t observed any soul but her own yet could make that one out.” His eyes locked on Snape’s. “It has to do with why you do not think of yourself by your first name. It has to do with your mother. It has to do with the Mark you took and think, still, makes you a Death Eater in some way beyond the physical. It has to do with the hatreds that eat pieces of your life even now. One of them nearly destroyed your relationship with Harry.” Snape flinched, despite his fury, at the reminder of what going cold had done. “And the other is eating you alive now, inside and out. Werewolf fear.”

“None of this is your right to comment upon,” Snape whispered tightly.

“I can See it,” said Joseph. He was calm, and that infuriated Snape further. He could not think of the last time someone so close to him when he was in a mood like this had been calm. “If you truly do not want help in healing, then no, it’s not my right to heal you. But I think I should tell you that I understand you. Just being a bastard does not drive me away, because I understand the reasons that you are a bastard. And I can see where these hatreds are leading you. You may yet lose Harry, if you act on your hatred of lycanthropy.”

“You cannot predict the future!” Only when he finished it did Snape realize how close to a cry that had been.

“Character is destiny.” Joseph studied him intently from beneath a lock of dark hair. “But we can change our own destiny if we change our own character. I truly believe that. And so that means that this is a chance for you, Severus Snape, to change it, if you don’t want my help or the help of anyone else. But I will warn you: persisting in stubborn pride will lose you everything. Your life is tied closely to Harry’s now. Anyone could See that, too. And he is changing, willingly changing, as a result of being in the Sanctuary and working with Vera.”

“If you mean to say that he will change to someone who will not love me—“

Joseph shook his head. “I don’t think that’s possible. I do think it’s possible that he will change into someone who cannot forgive you, if you act on that hatred gnawing out a place in your heart. You acknowledge your love for him, if only to yourself. Do you truly want your fear to triumph over that, and lose everything in a mistaken moment?”

“That will not happen,” Snape said tightly.

“It already has.” Joseph’s voice was a near whisper now. “Granted, for a potion that Harry doesn’t know about yet. But how does creating a poison for werewolves do anything but feed your fear and put a

weapon into your hands? What will you do if that weapon proves irresistible?"

Snape did not bother with telling the man to get out. He simply raised his wand and spoke the Severing Curse.

Nothing happened. Joseph gave him an acutely disappointed look. "The Sanctuary prevents use of Dark Arts," he said quietly, and then turned around and left.

Snape shut the door and stood on the other side of it, eyes closed. He could control himself. He would control himself. So the air of this place was like acid, but if he had no Seer and it tried to reach out to him through dreams, he could resist it. Joseph had acknowledged as much.

He felt, as if it were a second heart in his chest, the presence of the werewolf poison in his trunk. He had not dared to leave it in his lab, just in case Harry wandered in and recognized the silvery potion for what it was.

You are already lying to him. What comes next?

He knew that, if Harry did change into someone who valued his own self-worth and his moral judgments again, then it was entirely possible he would not forgive Snape this. He understood Snape's fear, he had said as much. But then, he understood the werewolves' anger and frustration, and Snape had still heard him threaten to drain Loki's magic in a steady voice. Push far enough, and Harry would strike back. And the distance one could push might grow smaller as he became more and more his own person.

How much of his tolerance have I already eaten?

Snape had lived most of his life secure, if not exactly content, in the knowledge that he had made his own mistakes. Other people had their share of blame, but the largest was his own. There were exceptions, such as the prank when Black had tried to kill him, but they were few. His own were such large mistakes that he didn't have to try to repair them; he already knew they were irreparable. And that

meant he didn't have to be nice, or love, or to live in the sharp and confusing world that Harry kept trying to deal with. He could stay still. There was no effort involved, only the sharp, bitter, broken glass of self-knowledge and self-satisfaction.

His love for Harry had not changed that. He had retreated from being cold, but he still didn't consider that he could let the coldness go. Why should he? He was unnecessarily bitter, and knew it. He was scarred, and knew it. He took great pleasure in existing, both bitter and scarred, long after his enemies had tried to kill and break him.

But what would happen if he did lose Harry's forgiveness because of one of his scars?

He knew the answer. It would not be worth it.

He felt the presence of the werewolf poison like a suppurating wound, now.

He did not acknowledge most of what Joseph said, Snape told himself. He did acknowledge the truth that Harry had come here seeking healing and was probably on the way to it.

And if he changed, then Snape could not remain as he was. He wondered, now, if it was only the long delays and setbacks Harry had suffered on the road to healing that had enabled him to remain as he was so for long.

That is a terrible thought.

But accurate.

Snape had never made a practice of hiding from his own observations, either, and those who tended to flinch at his tongue had only his scorn.

He was still not willing to speak to Joseph. These wounds were his own. And destroying the werewolf poison would be a useless gesture. He knew how to make the potion, now. He could duplicate it easily, especially considering the ingredients he'd brought.

Not a coincidence that you brought those ingredients, is it?

But he would not take the Dreamless Sleep Potion. He would wait for the dreams. He would change, if at all, on his own and at his own pace.

Besides, he doubted that the dreams could truly change him. Why should they? He had been through horrors that would have throttled lesser minds, and they had all been real.

Draco stretched his hands luxuriously over his head. Now this was more like it. The Seers had given him a bed that rivaled his own at Malfoy Manor, and a room that had murals on the walls with white-blond wizards excelling in all sorts of battles and treaty negotiations. One even had a man Draco was sure was his ancestor becoming Minister of Magic.

“Draco?”

He looked up. Nina was poking her head around the edge of his bedroom door, and she carried a tray with covered dishes that steamed. Draco felt his mouth water. “Come in,” he said, “since you have food.”

Nina laughed and carried the tray in, balancing it gently on the edge of his table. Draco eyed it approvingly. It was made of silver, and the first dish Nina held out towards him was lightly steamed vegetables, the only kind Draco would generally consent to eat. Raw carrots and the like made him sick. He took up his fork, sipped from the glass of orange juice that stood next to his plate, and finished a few dainty bites before he asked, “Do we have a daily schedule?”

Nina shook her head and sat down in a chair next to the bed. “No. That would be counterproductive. If nothing else, the day after a shattering revelation, such as tends to happen to our guests from time to time, is not the one to insist on a brisk run or swim.” She smiled again, but Draco saw her eyes were serious, and braced himself. “Draco, if I can ask something—what’s your father like?”

Draco blinked. She must see something of him in me, but I suppose, since he's not here and she can't read his soul, this is the next best thing. "Proud," he said. "Cold. Stern. He only loves my mother and me, and he gets vengeance on anyone who hurts us." He smiled as he remembered what his father had told him about getting vengeance on the Death Eater's family who had hurt his mother. "He's a proper heir of the Malfoy line, and he's always emphasized that for me. I managed to surprise him when I showed up early to confront him and gain his respect. He didn't intend to confirm me as his magical heir, but he did." Draco knew he was bragging, but Nina had said she was there to listen to him. Who else should he brag to?

"And your mother?" Nina asked.

Draco shrugged and ate another few bites before he answered. "Also proud. She would kill if anyone threatened me or Father, and she fights beside Father in battle—you wouldn't believe how graceful they are together. But she's more skeptical about pureblood ideas than Father. She was the one who insisted that I attend Hogwarts, and I think it's because she wanted me to meet Muggleborns face to face and then still see if I could kill them. But she stayed married to Father even though he was a Death Eater, so she can't resent them all that much. She was also the one who named me. My father wanted to name me after his father, I think. I know that she loves me. There have been times when I'm unsure about Father, but I always know with Mother." He paused, and then decided that this would be the safest place to say something he hadn't even felt comfortable telling Harry. "I think she was happy when the Dark Lord fell, to tell you the truth," he said in a low voice. "She knew he would probably return, but she had the peace and time to raise me. She didn't want me to grow up in the middle of a war."

Nina nodded.

"Why did you want to know?" Draco asked, as he spread butter on a piece of toast.

Nina scanned his face. Whatever she saw there must have reassured her, because she said, "I see echoes of them both in you, Draco. And

I can see you that you admire your father and thought most of your life that you'd be just like him. But you're far more your mother's son."

Draco was in the middle of eating the toast, and nearly spat out a large bite. He did manage to swallow it, though, because it wouldn't have been dignified for a Malfoy to spit. "Excuse me," he said, when he could speak again. "That's a rather large assumption to make on a day's acquaintance."

Nina laughed. "Draco, I think you forgot the part where I can see your soul."

"I am a Malfoy," Draco insisted. "I am worthy of my family's heritage, or I wouldn't have been confirmed as the Malfoy magical heir."

"Why would you think that being your mother's son made you unworthy of your Malfoy heritage?" Nina drew her knees up and placed her cheek on one of them, staring at him.

"I just—she's a Black, that's all," Draco said, a little recovered now. "Of course, it's still an honorable name and line, if you discount the insanity, but I'm not Draco Black."

"Blood has very little to do with it," said Nina. "We see someone's character, Draco. As far as blood goes, you're half Malfoy and half Black. As far as character goes, it's almost all Black. I think your mother made as sure of that as she could. Your father sounds overwhelming, but I don't think he won their war."

The image of his parents warring over how to raise him was a new one on Draco. And yet, if he thought about it, he could see where Nina might take that impression. His mother had named him, his mother had insisted on sending him to Hogwarts when Lucius had wanted Durmstrang, and he had not begun training in the pureblood rituals until he was six, despite Lucius saying his father had started him on the path to being a proper Malfoy when he was much younger.

And there were other little things that—

“Sweet Merlin,” Draco breathed. “My mother’s more subtle than my father is.”

Nina chuckled. “Considerably, I would think, from your description of her. And you do have the potential to follow her.” She scrutinized Draco carefully. “Not exactly, of course, because your relationship with Harry is very different from the way Narcissa’s with Lucius’s sounds. But you do have the potential to be subtle and insistent and a great political success. It sounds like your father is feared.”

Draco nodded fervently.

“But you could be adored.”

Draco’s mind flooded with images, only a few of which involved Harry. Many were of him charming Harry’s political enemies at the Ministry, even the Minister himself, who had good reason to dislike Malfoys. Others involved him making haughty purebloods forget about Harry’s halfblood status, as he hadn’t managed to do at his own festival, a failure that still galled him. And he saw his mother’s shining face in there, too, as Narcissa returned from yet another dance done to persuade some Dark families to become Harry’s allies. He wondered, for the first time, why she had done that instead of his father, if his father really was the better politician.

The thought of being half Black, or mostly Black, suddenly didn’t sound half bad.

Especially because I’m not insane.

He looked up at Nina. “I think I’d like to be adored.” He ignored her laughter. “Can you help show me how?”

Nina inclined her head, eyes sparkling. “We can work on that.” Harry halted on a terrace and stared down into what looked like a jungle scene. It was all crawling green vines, crowded with blue flowers. Water fell with a thunderous crash from a cascade half-buried in the vines. Harry saw birds skimming through the drops, bright flashes of green and white and pink, calling in voices that might have sounded harsh but barely managed to pierce the waterfall.

He sat down and looked up at the sun, standing near noon.

He was completely alone, again. He had put the Many snake back in his room, and he had avoided other guests and Seers in his walk, though he had sometimes heard footsteps and voices to let him know they were there.

And, for the first time, being left alone with nothing to focus on but himself was not driving him mad.

Harry closed his eyes. The sun blazed on the back of his neck, comforting heat. He lifted his hand and the stump of his left wrist, and let them both rest there, feeling the difference between them, alive, crawling fingers that scratched an itch and flicked at the sweat sliding down his skin, and scarred, ended arm.

He let himself think of having a second hand.

Carefully, he stripped the idea of all the contexts that automatically came with it: what his allies would think, what Snape and Draco would think, how it would make him look to the public if he came back from this retreat with two hands—whether Aurora Whitestag and her supporters would commend snidely on him trying to heal instead of studying how to defeat Voldemort—and how long it might take to break Bellatrix's curses and how he couldn't afford the time.

He put them all away in an Occlumency pool and looked at the idea of getting a second hand on his own.

Do you want this?

You don't have to make any decision that you don't want. Fuck what Snape and Draco would say. Your choice, Harry.

He waited, sending the question out into the maze of himself, wanting to see what echo would come back.

And like a wind, the answer came.

Maybe. I don't know yet.

Harry could feel his smile widening. He opened his eyes and watched as a parrot hurtled, squawking, from one vine to another, drenching its tail in the water on the way.

And "maybe" is perfectly fine.

Tears stung his eyes for a moment. He leaned back on the terrace and folded his arms behind his head, staring up at the sun until afterimages danced in front of his eyes.

Wonder stirred in him, lifting its head and looking cautiously around, before it romped into him and became his major emotion.

I can make those choices. I really can. And if Snape and Draco really love me, they're not going to make bargains with me over it, and no one is going to push me, and whatever I decide is, finally, fine.

The birds took off a moment later because Harry was laughing, hurling the sound like a spear down into the vines and the water, to fall and be lost in the middle of cool green.

I'm free.